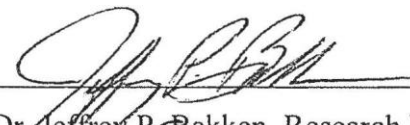BLACK WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION: HOW RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER

COALESCE TO IMPACT SUCCESS

A Scholarly Research Project

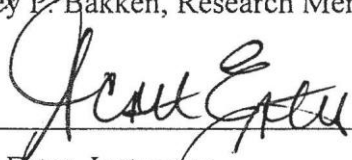Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Approved:

_____
Dr. Jeffrey P. Bakken, Research Mentor

_____
Dr. Scott Estes, Instructor

_____
Dr. Jana Hunzicker, Program Director

_____
Dr. Anna Viviani, Department Chair

_____
Dr. Kathy Shapley, Dean

Treycé L. Gaston-Spears

Bradley University

December 2024

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative, transformational, phenomenological, action research study is to ascertain how race, class, and gender coalesce to impact the success of Black women at predominantly white institutions. The term "success" in the context of this study holds layered meanings, particularly from a Black feminist perspective that emphasizes both individual achievement and collective well-being within systems marked by structural inequality. In the realm of higher education, success cannot merely be defined by traditional metrics such as degree attainment, career advancement, or social mobility. Instead, it encompasses the nuanced experiences **of** navigating and resisting intersecting systems of oppression—racism, sexism, and classism—within predominantly white institutions (PWIs) (Hill Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989).

Drawing on Black feminist thought, success for Black women involves achieving academic and professional goals while maintaining a sense of self-definition and authenticity in environments that often marginalize or undermine their identities (Hill Collins, 2000). It requires cultivating resilience and community—leveraging personal strength and communal support networks to confront barriers and redefine narratives of achievement (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Success also entails transformative engagement, wherein Black women actively resist dominant narratives, create spaces of belonging, and contribute to the empowerment of others within and beyond academia (hooks, 2000).

Furthermore, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) is critical to understanding success in this study, as it accounts for the compounded challenges Black women face at the intersection of race, class, and gender. Success, therefore, involves not only excelling academically but also navigating these intersecting identities in ways that foster holistic well-being—balancing

personal, cultural, and professional identities while challenging institutional practices that perpetuate inequality.

This study explores how Black women define success on their own terms, emphasizing both personal fulfillment and contributions to their communities. Their experiences reveal that success is not merely a destination but an ongoing process of negotiating identity, building support networks, and pushing back against systemic barriers in ways that open doors for others. In this light, success becomes a multifaceted and communal achievement, grounded in individual excellence, collective uplift, and the transformation of exclusionary systems.

Black women are entering post-secondary colleges and universities at historical rates however graduation rates fail to corroborate such increases. Implications of existing studies are that barriers exist that hinder success for Black women. This study seeks to understand (1) Why are there so few Black women with doctorate degrees? (2) What are the barriers to completing the degree program? (3) What are the salient qualities Black women see as necessary for graduation? (4) What support systems were most valued while pursuing this degree program? This study should be important to a wide audience since professors, administrators, students, and researchers alike will benefit from understanding the unique social location of Black women as racialized, genderized individuals and the impact on their experiences in higher education. Additionally, all women of color who are currently pursuing an advanced degree can benefit from understanding how to maneuver the academic landscape from the viewpoint of experienced Black Women, those who value the transformative power of shared experiences gained from articulated standpoints and believe in the potential for meaningful reform will recognize the promise inherent in the outcomes of this important research.

Key Words: Black women, Race, Class, Gender, Success, Higher Education.

DEDICATION

To my husband, the very one I live for, the one who has made it possible for me to fulfill my dreams. To the family, we created together who inspire me to greatness every day. My daughter, whom I love dearly and who gave me a title (mom) that I cherish. She is so much more than she might ever realize and the light that shines through her is Godly and kind and I am grateful to say she is mine. To her children, Major defies the limits of his being daily with a smile that warms hearts, and a personality that transcends his silence, once called the Mayor of Stevenson School, and recently serving as Captain of the track team at Bloomington High School. With an artistic flair that makes those who follow Majorsart happy to await his next creation. To McKenzie whose inquisitive nature and confidence make her a standout in any crowd, unafraid and uninhibited at nine, asking the questions that most need to know but are too afraid to ask. She has my heart, and I am blessed to be able to enjoy her every day and watch her blossom into an unstoppable Black woman. Finally, Charles, who once broke a jack (jacks & Ball), which I never knew was possible, seems to be on track to discover the cure for cancer and many other chronic illnesses of our time. At 6, he recently put his shoe down a manhole just to see what would happen. He is my precious, precocious young learner, with a sincere heart. To my stepson Joshua; his lovely wife, Monique; and their three children, Jace, Marley, and Destin whom I long to know better: know that you are part of our legacy and to always make choices understanding how it will impacts our future. And just know that three sets of parents is not necessarily a bad thing.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have so much to be thankful for and so many to remember in this effort. Acknowledging the Everlasting Power in my veins that feeds my soul and ignites my spirit, and through whom I can do all things, my mother and father always taught me that education was the key to success. I believed them and began teaching my life-sized dolls, and teddy bears, all that I knew. I watched and learned as much as possible from my eleven siblings, for whom I am grateful (Jewel, Bob, and Allen posthumously, Cleta, Cowboy, David, Haqq, Sherrie, Ramona, James, and Gary). I did not have to repeat the same mistakes, and they contributed so much richness to my life. Then I married an up-and-coming, handsome, attorney, who after 35 years, one daughter (Lyndze'), one stepson (Joshua), and six grandchildren, still manages to love and support me like no other. Uncle Pops who instilled in us all that knowledge is power, and shared facts and figures with us as children that have yet to be disproven. Dr. Frank Gomes (Shawnee), who, in one conversation, changed my world and provided advice that I rely on to this day. Dr. Michael Gaston and Dr. Kwamé Curtis, my nephews, whose distinguished works preceded me and who paved the way. Dr. Bakken, Dr. Estes, and Dr. Nugent (and many more) from Bradley University for their tireless efforts throughout my journey. Dr. Ellis Hurd and Dr Erin Mikulec, and the entire staff in the College of Education, School of Teaching and Learning at Illinois State University for their open-arm acceptance of me and their willingness to share their time and knowledge. I extend my deepest gratitude to the participants of this study and to those who facilitated the process of connecting me with them. The insights you shared are invaluable, and I approached the responsibility of representing your experiences with the utmost seriousness. It is my sincere hope that the findings of this research reflect a respectful and accurate portrayal of your journeys, serving as a catalyst for lasting institutional change in academia, ultimately

contributing to the greater good. My Cohorts, you have been the best that I could have asked for, encouraging, dedicated, caring, thank you all so very much. And finally, something most might not think to do, thank you Geek Squad, Tom Hardy, and all who provided technical assistance in this effort.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Introduction

This topic is important to me as a Black woman who, on the very day of rehearsal for graduation from high school, was pulled out of line and sent to the Dean's office. Immediately, I thought I was in trouble although I had not been the four years prior. I was the only African American student in my graduating class. The Dean of Girls told me I was "not college material and should pursue work that would require the use of my hands." I immediately knew that I would defy her and go on to pursue my dreams because my parents had told me that I could be whatever I wanted to be. She should be somewhere thanking her lucky stars that I did not repeat our conversation with my parents. Over the years I have discussed this with many of my friends who graduated around the same year, only to find out that they were told something similar, as if nationally scripted for Black high school graduates in the late '70s. Perhaps the verbiage slowed my pursuit, but I continued to persevere.

Living as a Black woman has been interesting. The more I learn, the more I want to learn. Understanding that my gender, and race have impacted my access, and where people in this world see me fitting in, I am determined in this moment and the moment just described to define what success is for myself, and not be told by others what it should look like. Black Women in Higher Education: How Race, Class, and Gender Impact Success is the second in a series of research grown out of my own experience and my need to understand how other Black women cope in a world that makes them second-class citizens based on God-given traits.

This study aims to amplify the voices of a historically marginalized group, illuminating their lived experiences to provide insights into their historical realities for the purpose of redress. This research contemplates the central questions:

1. Why are there so few Black women with doctorate degrees.?

2. What are the barriers to completing the degree program?

3. What are the salient qualities Black women see as necessary for graduation?

4. What support systems were most valued while pursuing this degree program?

Black women's voices have been cut from the fabric of American History. Little has been written about the experiences that shed light on the injustices they have endured for centuries (Mirza, 2006). With the unexpected election of Barack Obama to the Presidency of the United States of America, North America, from 2009–2017, the entire world watched as Michelle Obama graced the halls of the White House and continued to "take the high road" each time adversity came her way.

Michelle, a highly educated Black woman, attended Chicago public schools and then Went on to study sociology and African American studies at Princeton University. She then graduated from Harvard Law School (Wikipedia, 2022). As the First Lady, she was supportive of her husband, and her family was important to her. Michelle was strikingly beautiful, confident, and intelligent. Undoubtedly, her presence changed how the world viewed Black women...or did it?

Black women have been marginalized (Butler, 2021) due to the burdensome history that characterizes them as less than, foot warmers, wombs to be taken for enriching the slave masters' holdings, discarded, and disregarded where policy and agency were embraced. Even today Black women are paid less for the same work, powerless in leadership positions, and invisible in educational settings, work settings, and board meetings (Gaston-Spears, 2006). Invisible or visible both become exhausting over time (Mirza, 2006).

Black women report the need for coping mechanisms to deal with the microinequities, derogatory and demeaning situations and encounters in their day. They rely on faith, family, friends, inner strength, courage, networking, and volunteering, (Spears, 2006), to stay grounded and continue their focus on goals they have set for themselves. Others have faithful, family-oriented husbands to support their dreams and inspire them to greatness.

This research project will look at Black women's success in higher education with success partially equated to matriculation, and partially to self-efficacy. The term **"success"** in the context of this study holds layered meanings, particularly from **a** Black feminist perspective that emphasizes both individual achievement and collective well-being within systems marked by structural inequality. In the realm of higher education, success cannot merely be defined by traditional metrics such as degree attainment, career advancement, or social mobility. Instead, it encompasses the nuanced experiences **of** navigating and resisting intersecting systems of oppression—racism, sexism, and classism—within predominantly white institutions (PWIs) (Hill Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989).

Drawing on Black feminist thought, success for Black women involves achieving academic and professional goals while maintaining a sense **of** self-definition and authenticity in environments that often marginalize or undermine their identities (Hill Collins, 2000). It requires cultivating resilience and community—leveraging personal strength and communal support networks to confront barriers and redefine narratives of achievement (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Success also entails transformative engagement, wherein Black women actively resist dominant narratives, create spaces of belonging, and contribute to the empowerment of others within and beyond academia (hooks, 2000).

Furthermore, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) is critical to understanding success in this study, as it accounts for the compounded challenges Black women face at the intersection of race, class, and gender. Success, therefore, involves not only excelling academically but also navigating these intersecting identities in ways that foster holistic well-being—balancing personal, cultural, and professional identities while challenging institutional practices that perpetuate inequality.

This study explores how Black women define success on their own terms, emphasizing both personal fulfillment and contributions to their communities. Their experiences reveal that success is not merely a destination but an ongoing process of negotiating identity, building support networks, and pushing back against systemic barriers in ways that open doors for others. In this light, success becomes a multifaceted and communal achievement, grounded in individual excellence, collective uplift, and the transformation of exclusionary systems.

Because we are unable to live our lives in one-dimensional spaces (Hill Collins, 1998). By incorporating a lens of race, class, and gender, we are better able to see how these master statuses coalesce to impact success.

Black women seeking higher education degrees are currently growing in number (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Part of what we are seeing is due to the rate at which Black women are admitted to scholarly academic programs. Being admitted to an advanced degree program does not equate to receipt of an advanced degree. According to Donovan and Guillory (2017), Black women have the lowest rate of graduation from higher educational institutions than any other racial or gendered group except Black men. In 2017 only 1% of Black women held doctorate degrees, and according to the National Center for Education Statistics, as of 2015, Black women accounted for only 2% of full-time faculty at institutions of higher learning (Coker et al., 2018).

There is not a shortage of Black women, but a shortage of Black women in academia who are

supported where they can make a difference and bring diverse views from perspectives of

perseverance and strength.

Background Information and Literature Review

American History plays a role in how Black women are perceived today (Knetge, 2018).

Controlling images of Black women as "mammies, maids and mistresses,' images that date back

to slavery and paint a picture of servitude, simpletons, and seducers, call into question daily just

how Black women can be taken seriously, Haynes et al. (2020). These images can be demeaning,

oppressive, and harmful to the level of confidence and self-assurance required to pursue

advanced degrees (Walkington, 2017). Black women are entering higher educational institutions

at a much greater rate than ever before. They face dual marginalization, lack of power, and

privilege (Knetge, 2018). In other words, even though they have the right to membership, and to

occupy space at post-secondary colleges and universities, Black women assume a position that

places them simultaneously inside the institution, yet outside circles of power and privilege, as

an outsider-within (Hill Collins, 1998). Patricia Hill Collins wrote in her book *Fighting Words:*

Black Women and the Search for Justice:

> More recently, I have deployed the term outsider-within to describe social locations or
> border spaces occupied by groups of unequal power. However, as the case of African
> Americans in the United States illustrates, formal citizenship rights do not automatically
> translate into substantive citizenship rights. (p. 5)

Black women must also deal with stereotypical ideologies, socio-structural stressors

(Butler, 2021), and the systemic inequalities in opportunities for Black women in higher

education as noted in his "And Aren't I a Woman: Black Women's Endurance in Higher

Education," article. The interlocking systems of oppression, or intersectionality of race, class,

and gender complicate Black women's experiences. "Black women's experiences are often

"swept under the rug despite being a critical perspective that remains largely unexamined" (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2017). Black women must be confident, push back as necessary, believe in their success, avoid distractions, and most of all, become advocates for themselves (Winkle-Wagner, 2017). Much of their experience is marred by dual minority status as they are racialized and genderized (Walkington, 2017), making it even more important that they show resiliency. Black women also must deal with unequal access to financial support (Winkle-Wagner, 2017), making their efforts to succeed in higher education more challenging. Many factors contribute to the underrepresentation of Black women in higher education such as psychosocial issues that impede their success (Henry et al., 2011).

In *Camouflaging Power and Privilege: A Critical Race Analysis of University Diversity Policies,* Iverson (2007), twenty-one diversity action plans are reviewed, and it is noted that "the diversity project as we know it on our campuses is complicit in perpetuating the racial order as historically constructed." Ascribed protocol as to the hierarchy of race, class, and gender places women, and Black women lowest on the racial and socio-economic scale. Therefore, being a poor Black woman ranks a person last in every conceivable category (Walkington, 2017). Move that knowledge into the academic setting to realize there is no level playing field. Historically, Blacks were never meant to be educated beyond what was necessary to know about clearing the fields and maintaining the plantation (Donovan & Guillory, 2017). They were not allowed to learn the alphabet or how to read during slavery, and if caught trying to learn, were severely punished or maimed by their owner (Coker et al., 2018). Institutionalized racism is not a new phenomenon (Mirza, 2006). We have learned that even some of the best-intentioned efforts at equitability fall short, and sometimes even promote the very issue they sought to curtail (Iverson, 2007).

More recently, when a police officer was allowed to place the full weight of his body on a man's neck, until he took his last breath, in broad daylight, on a busy street, outside a grocery store, in the U.S., over a $20 dispute, as women and children watched, at that very moment the world became an even less tolerant place for Black people. The world watched as Black women, men, and children were killed by those sworn to protect and serve. Killed in their homes, walking home from convenience stores, in their cars, and in front of their children, at home on the sofa eating ice cream, playing with a squirt gun in the park, was no place safe?

Repetitious murder of unarmed individuals going about their routines of life sends a message that Black life does not matter. When the protectors kill those, they are paid to protect, it is difficult to feel safe or that you have a voice to put an end to the indifference and the suffering.

Historical Relevance

For years Black women have been compared to other groups rather than being the group of focus (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). The disinterest shown concerning Black women's experiences has been harmful to their academic performance and impacts attrition (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). There can be serious consequences that arise from mistreatment.

Black Women have always been resilient under the worst of conditions. The Library of Congress holds a vast amount of information about Black women who changed history. In the 1700s, a slave by the name of Phyllis Wheatley was in servitude in Boston with a family that encouraged her education (something that did not happen often), seeing that she had some natural gifts for verse and language. In 1767 at the age of 13, she published the first of many poems, and had mastered Greek and Latin, during a time when scholars believed that such feats were beyond the capability of Africans. Additional works were published in 1773. Her literary

reputation, prowess, and charismatic personality garnered her praise throughout her life and even in death. Ms. Wheatly represented the intellectual achievements of her race and, in the battle to dismantle slave mentalities. She was but one among many. as Isabella Truth who later became an itinerant preacher and changed her name to Sojourner, after successfully fleeing slavery in 1827. Sojourner Truth possessed knowledge that was considered ahead of her time, and with no formal education, understood enough about the plight of her people to speak on inequality, organized religion, white privilege, and so many more issues in what is now her famous "Ain't I a Woman" speech in 1851. I could go on and discuss Harriet Tubman and the Underground railroad (1820–1913); Ida B. Wells, the original Rosa Parks (1862-1931); Madame C. J. Walker's hair care products (1867–1919); Mary McLeod Bethune who opened her a school and became and educator for young Negro girls (1875–1955); Jesse Redmon Fauset, editor of the *Crisis* Magazine (1882-1961); Nannie Helen Burroughs who opened a school for women and girls in Washington DC: "We specialize in the wholly impossible" (1879–1961); Zora Neal Hurston chronicler of African American life, author, educator (1891–1960); Bessie Coleman, first African American aviator (1892–1926); Bessie Smith, blues singer (1894–1937); Mary Caldwell Dawson, founder of the National Negro Opera (1894–1962); Marian Anderson, opera singer (1902–1993); Josephine Baker, vaudeville and Broadway star (1906–1975); Katherine Dunham ballet/ethnic dancer (1909–2006); and Gloria Mae Swanson MacAvoy Moore Gaston, whose name reflected the intellect and bond within the African American family, and who was the mother of twelve, each of whom would study and make significant contributions in their respective communities. Gloria, who through the tumultuous years of the civil rights era, worked, and managed a household alongside her husband Robert L. (Gat) Gaston, entrepreneur ahead of his time, devoted father, provider, activist, and civil rights leader, whose history in our

community is documented in the Black History Museum, and who would raise the likes of me, and like so many more, would make unforgettable contributions to today's culture.

Challenges/Obstacles

The challenge from a research standpoint will be (1) locating willing participants to provide information, complete interviews, and questionnaires, share experiences through journaling exercises, and embrace the research process; (2) getting mainstream America to understand the importance of this topic; (3) placing Black women at the forefront of societal concern; and (4) allowing the findings to permeate modern messages with hope and wellness for all women. It is my hope to seek out Black women who hold doctoral degrees, at a variety of age ranges, including post-career and retirees. This strategic move should eliminate many of the obstacles I might otherwise encounter with undergraduate students where additional IRB submissions might have been necessary at each college or university where potential participants would be enrolled. My goal will be to learn more about the intricacies of the educational environment from the vantage point of the participants and how the multiplicity of societal oppressors has shaped their experiences. It is my hope that my findings based on their experiences will provide insight into how Black women's experiences inform theory and vice versa.

From a contextual standpoint, the challenge becomes creating a safe space for participants to share their experiences while protecting their anonymity. Participants of color, all orientations, beliefs, and social status, will contribute and come together and learn from each other how they wish to be treated, what support mechanisms help them achieve, and how to respect their space. Then, take that information and go forward, teaching with each encounter, how to make the world a better place.

Definitions

Action Research: Any systematic inquiry conducted by teachers, administrators, counselors or others with a vested interest in teaching and learning process or environment for the purpose of gathering information about how other particular schools operate, how they teach, and how their students learn (Hines, 2011).

Class: One of the groups of people in a society thought of as being at the same social or economic level (upper class, working class, middle class).

Coalesce: Into something, to come together to form one larger group, a substance.

Code Switching Identity: shifting tool used to mask, or alter, one's authentic racial/ethnic makeup to accommodate the dominant culture of a particular environment.

Colored Bigshots Go-tos in the Black community: Respected leaders in the Black community, who have the following to quell an uprising and who have access to boardrooms and insider briefings/discussions that others do not.

Controlling Images: Not representative of reality, but a disguise used to offend and degrade and perpetuate and debase Black women.

Coping Mechanism: Ways Black women find to deal with adversity, invisibility, indifference, and other off-putting treatment and feelings from those who continually attempt to silence them.

Gender: The fact of being male or female, especially when considered along with social and cultural differences, rather than differences in biology, members of a particular gender as a group.

Critical Race Theory: Takes into consideration racial bias inherent in our legal systems and institutions as they were created without people of color in mind.

Ideologies: Body of ideas reflecting the interests of a group of people. Represents the process by which certain assumed qualities attributed to Black Women, are used to justify oppression (ex. controlling images).

Intersectionality: Provides a means of examining overlapping systems of oppression.

Jim Crow: Racial segregation and discrimination enforced by laws, customs, and practices in the Southern States of the U.S.

Microaggressions: Small slights.

Outsider-Within: Social locations or border spaces occupied by groups of unequal power, as defined by Patricia-Hill Collins (1998) in Fighting Words.

Persevere: Continue a course of action in the face of counter influences, opposition, difficulty, or adversity, with little or no prospect.

Salient: Important, major, necessary, primary.

Self-efficacy Ability to produce an intended or desired outcome.

Socio-structural: The U.S. society's placement of black women toward the bottom of racial and gender hierarchy.

Stereotypical: representing or reflecting reality but functioning as a disguise or mystification of objective social relations. Exaggerated beliefs about others that are perpetuated over time.

Stress Any demand or encounter perceived as taxing or exceeding resources and taken together with personal and environmental factors over prolonged periods.

Success: The fact that you have achieved something you want and have been trying to do or get.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

Black Women are entering post-secondary colleges and universities at a higher rate than ever before Winkle-Wagner, (2015). However, the vast majority are not graduating at the same rate of entry (Donovan & Guillory, 2017). Their experiences in maneuvering the educational terrain from their unique social location as racialized and gendered social beings go undocumented. This study aims to look at a phenomenon around barriers to successful completion of doctoral degree programs through the exploration of Black women's lived experiences to answer these core questions:

1. Why are there so few Black women with doctoral degrees?

2. What are the barriers to completing the degree program?

3. What are the salient qualities Black women see as necessary for graduation?

4. What support systems were most valued while pursuing this degree program?

Additionally, the goal is to determine or understand the plight of Black women and how Black women in predominantly White post-secondary colleges and universities thrive and persist, and how race, class, and gender coalesce to impact success.

Winkle-Wagner (2009a, 2014) discusses the historical alienation, stereotyping, low expectations, and lingering racism of black at all levels (students, professors, administrators) report on predominantly White campuses. Stereotyping, in particular, has led to what some scholars call *strong woman or superwoman* syndrome. This phenomenon assumes that Black women are resilient, strong, and in need of little support. It is also associated with the role of confidence and the importance of strength, which can lead to added stress for many Black Women. This study looked at Black women who had received a bachelor's degree or above

between 1955 and 2013 from a predominantly White Institution and their advice on confidence in the pursuit of a college degree. "Believe You Will Achieve," a qualitative study that points to these issues of marginalization as being the primary reason for Black women lagging behind other groups when it comes to graduation from higher educational institutions. Data collection revealed that confidence is the necessary characteristic Black women must have to persevere and succeed in college. Exuding confidence allows Black women to advocate on their own behalf as required when other support systems are not readily available. Part of the data collection methodology was interviewing, and recruitment was through chain sampling or word of mouth from one participant who finds another. The primary advice from the participants was to build confidence, learn to push back, believe in being successful, avoid distractions, and always advocate for oneself.

Flowers (2017), using semi-structured, in-depth interviews, obtained participant perceptions on factors that allowed them to successfully complete their doctorates. The study asserts a lack of Black women completing doctoral degrees in social work. This qualitative study used phenomenological methods to examine the factors that twenty Black women identify as assisting them in earning their doctoral degrees. Internal supports included determination, faith, and self-care, while external supports were noted to be institutional supports, jobs & funding, mentors, social networking, and therapy. Participants also identified internal and external barriers to their success, which included a lack of self-confidence, financial burdens, and feeling isolated. Additionally, participants noted family loss, grief, and financial burdens as primary contributors to these feelings. Institutional politics interfered with their ability to focus. In looking at the unique social location of each participant as racialized and genderized individuals, most

indicated that gender was the least of their problems. However, class and race set them apart from their cohorts.

Zamani (2003) discusses the rise in African American student enrollment in post-secondary education. This qualitative study focuses on issues of equal access and persistence, lending credence to the notion that degree completion is less likely among marginalized groups. Zamani (2003) again acknowledges the unique social location held by Black women at the intersection of race and gender, resulting in feelings of invisibility. The historical legacy of exclusion and the struggle for inclusion speak to the issues faced by Black women dealing with the duality of their identity. Black women have faced marginalization based solely on their being black and women. The central aim of this article was to consider which types of post-secondary institutions afford African American women a sense of agency in meeting their educational needs. Zamani (2003) postulates that historically Black colleges and universities, which were initially constructed to improve the condition of newly freed slaves, foster degree aspirations and encourage careers in engineering, sciences, and mathematics. Additionally, for Black women, the HBCU benefits their development and positively impacts their overall performance and subsequent mobility. It was also noted that single-sex institutions like Vassar, Barnard, Spellman, and Wellesley College have a high success rate for graduating highly successful Black women and noted that in 1960, when they began to recruit Black women, their Black graduates were among the "who's who of Black American elites. Zamani (2003) suggests that these colleges designed for special populations did a better job with cultural congruity and afforded opportunities for self-actualization. One hundred and six African American men and women were surveyed. The response rate was 70%. The information received was about their educational and financial background. Semi-structured interviews were conducted. Twenty

respondents were African American women. Their experiences were noted. Campus climate, financial concerns, enrollment, peer relations, and faculty advisors were all examined regarding their impact on success. Findings suggest that Black women are considered outsiders due to their genderized, racialized social location. Therefore, they must employ coping mechanisms to deal with loneliness and the inability to fit in at the institution due to the culture designed by white males who did not have Black women students in mind. They tend to have unsupportive advisors and deal with microaggressions, discrimination, insensitive peers, and professors; thus, they exhibit more assertive behaviors (advocating for themselves).

Knetge (2018) utilizes a strength-based perspective to look at factors contributing to the success of Black women in higher education. Knetge (2018) recognizes the dual marginalization that comes with the social location of Black women and the lack of power and privilege that has been consistent throughout American history. In-depth interviews were conducted with two participants who self-identified as Black women and had successfully attained at least a bachelor's degree, providing insight into their lived experiences. In the interviews come themes of religion, spirituality, family, economic issues, social environments, and resisting Eurocentric beauty standards that guard against hopelessness and become coping mechanisms. The study concludes by relating case studies to the relevance in the social work field, research, and the Black community as a whole and how the resiliency of Black women achievers is remarkable, particularly in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, and stressors. Leaning on God in difficult times, family support, and valuing education are the primary reasons Black women persevere. They also have social circles that keep them motivated, rejecting the notion that they may not be as intelligent. Embracing the defiance in accepting and loving their appearance and the power that comes with that moment of realization.

Apugo (2019) is a "qualitative thematic synthesis of literature inclusive of integrative findings from peer-reviewed research articles, conceptual papers, reports, books, dissertations, and essays that explore the coping experiences of African American women at predominantly White institutions (PWIs)." It provides insight into African American women's existence in predominantly White institutions in the face of racism, microaggressions, stereotype threats, false labels, lack of mentorship, identity affirmation, and professional academic opportunities. Apugo (2019) asserts that minorities become model minorities seeking White validation. The study examines how mechanisms to receive validation are used, such as code-switching, an identity-shifting tool used to mask, alter, or soften one's authentic racial/ethnic make-up to accommodate the dominant culture of a particular environment. It discusses the coping mechanisms Black women employ to endure the microaggressions and hostility often found in predominantly White institutions. The study concludes that Black women tap into spiritual and ritual-centered coping mechanisms to thrive at predominantly White institutions. Also, the persistence of Black women at predominantly White institutions is contingent upon the Institution's willingness to create an environment that will support overall well-being.

Donovan and Guillory (2017) insist that Black women have the lowest graduation rate compared to all other racial-gendered groups, except Black men. The overall graduation rate for Black women is troubling because it is almost the same as in 1996, at 43%. Recognizing that challenges to graduation exist, they describe being a middle-class Black woman as living at the nexus of racial-gendered oppression. Intersectionality is the lens used in this study to explore how race, class, and gender add socio-structural stressors that negatively impact the experiences of Black women. They define *stress* as any demand or encounter perceived as taxing or

exceeding resources and taken together with personal and environmental factors over prolonged periods. These stressors can impact the body and cause mental health concerns.

In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) draws from oral histories of Black women alongside literature and archival records. She argues that Black feminist thought has been suppressed through three interconnected dimensions of oppression: capitalism, which exploits Black women's labor and restricts them to service roles; political oppression, denying Black women rights, equitable justice, and education; and controlling images, where stereotypes like "welfare queens" and "overachievers" sustain racial and gender ideologies, reinforcing systemic marginalization. Hill Collins reinterprets the concept of being an "outsider within" to reflect power imbalances and emphasizes the importance of dialogue in countering dominant narratives. Through this lens, Black feminist thought emerges as a form of resistance, reconstructing knowledge from a marginalized perspective.

Hill-Collins (2000) acknowledges the ongoing marginalization of Black women and how they have been kept from being first-class citizens, powerless, poor, and without access. Black women have been controlled by surveillance and images of themselves as welfare queens, Black lady overachievers, and traders of their race. Hill-Collins (2000) suggests that naming, claiming, and proclaiming the truth are powerful in and of themselves and speak to the significance of dialogue from many sources. The methodology of this study is based on acknowledging Black feminist thought as subjugated knowledge that constructs a Black feminist consciousness (that struggles against white male interpretations of the world).

Coker et al. (2018) employs a qualitative autoethnographic approach, or critical self-study, to examine specific familial and societal messages. The experiences and self-reflection

acknowledge that Black women have faced numerous social challenges of oppression related to race, class, gender, and colonization. Chattel (full) slavery, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, being considered property of white enslavers, no control over their bodies nor parental rights over the children they would bear. Laws prohibited the education of Black people. If a Black person was caught trying to learn, they were severely punished or physically maimed by their oppressor, who instilled the message of inferiority and non-humanness. Nevertheless, Black men and women risked their lives to learn to read and write. The 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution eradicated African enslavement—newly freed Black people built schools to educate their young. intersectionality of race, class, and gender is the lens used to examine the experiences of Black women. Barriers to success include lack of mentorship, minimal or ineffective retention programs, Higher expectations from Black faculty, Predominantly White institutions marked by racism, sexism, and homophobia; Black women are adjunct faculty rather than in full-time tenure track positions. There is a notion of modifying racial markers, such as nappy (kinky) hair and dark complexion, to alter credentials to avoid deliberate dismissiveness. Five themes emerged as central findings in the study: family expectations, family support, self-efficacy (ability to produce a desired or intended outcome), the importance of role models, resiliency in dealing with stereotypes, and multiple responsibilities.

Butler (2021) says Black women represent untold stories of struggle, advancement, and linked fate. He also acknowledges the interlocking systems of oppression that work to complicate the experiences of Black women in higher education. Being a Black woman engenders a unique burden. Intersectional identities heighten gendered racism. Predominantly White institutions isolate, dehumanize, devalue, silence, and push out Black women. Black women are unwelcomed and unsupported, and yet they make a conscious decision to persevere.

The methodology for the study was storytelling. Black women have doubled enrollment rates in the last 30 years, according to Winkle-Wagner (2015). However, graduation rates have not improved, suggesting barriers to achieving a degree remain. For example, 1 in 5 Black women holds a bachelor's degree, compared to 1 in 2 Asian Women and 1 in 3 White women (McElrath & Martin, 2021). The lack of focus on the experiences of Black women could hinder the efficacy of institutional policies geared toward maximizing academic performance, reducing attrition, and enhancing college experiences for this segment of society. Winkle-Wagner (2015) further believes that there are real consequences to the mistreatment of Black women, including the likelihood of graduation.

Loots and Walker (2016) introduced the capabilities approach as an evaluative tool for marginalized students pursuing doctoral studies. This qualitative study in South Africa examines environmental, social, and psychological aspects of seven postgraduate Black women's experiences. It touches on whether supportive and enabling academic environments to have been created for marginalized groups to succeed. The experiences of seven Black women speak of barriers they have experienced throughout their doctoral journeys, but the data also creates a sense of optimism. The article looks at numerical data and then turns to what in-depth studies have reported on the impact that gender and race have had on women in doctoral education. The study indicates that South African women often postpone their enrollment in higher educational institutions to raise a family, support their husbands in achieving their goals, or wait for their children to reach independence before pursuing their own life goals. This integrated approach considers personal, social, and environmental 'conversion factors' that impact individual agency. Findings included 126 gender and racial marginalizations faced in pursuit of their doctoral

degree program. Continuing the conversation is a way to promote social justice around these issues.

Summary

This section covering Black women and gender were merged because it was discovered to be impossible to talk about one characteristic without dealing with the other. These authors recognize the unique racialized-genderized social location of Black women and the historical microaggressions, marginalization, isolation, and controlling images that add stress to an already highly stressful endeavor such as pursuing a doctoral degree. These studies further acknowledge the need for more in-depth information about what, if anything, has changed in the current climate of Black Lives Matter. These tumultuous times inform the current climate, environment, relationships, support, and other issues in higher education.

As with most institutions, academia is no exception when considering that it was not designed initially with Black women, or women of color, in mind. Education is imperative for survival in American culture. Historical isolation and alienation have been recorded as being at all levels of participation in higher education (student, administrator, professor). Increased enrollment levels speak to the importance of educational attainment for Black women. Entering predominantly White institutions (PWI) and dealing with the interlocking systems of oppression and intersectional identities of race, class, and gender are challenging. Black women's experiences differ from other racial and ethnic groups in that they occupy a social location often marred by dual marginalization. Historical mistreatment of Black women dates back to chattel slavery, where Black women endured physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, being legal property of the enslaver, with no rights over their bodies or the children they would bear (Coker et al., 2018). Black women have been denied rights and privileges, excluded from holding political

office, denied literacy, underfunded, segregated, and had controlling images that impact their ability to progress. The lack of focus on Black women's experiences through meaningful dialogue in the annals of academia where real change can occur maintains the status quo. It should be noted that while Loots et al. 2016 capabilities approach does not resemble this study, the methodology and a few other features, such as using the experiences of Black students seeking doctoral degrees to discover what barriers exist, are powerful and highly related.

Race

Delgado and Stefancic (2023) noticing a subtler racism began to gain momentum in the '60s, '70s, and '80s, as it became clear that new theories and strategies needed to be developed to combat this phenomenon. This new emergent thinking grew out of legal studies and radical feminist thought. They looked at the relationships between power and social identities/roles. Part of the mission became righting wrongs. Critical race theory (CRT) is a movement to study and transform the relationships among race, racism, and power. CRT found its way into numerous avenues where conflicts, controversies, and predicaments existed. Many changes we see and enjoy today have emerged from this movement. Critical race theory became popular in the 1970s.

Lentin (2020) discusses what people do in the name of racism. More specifically, people motivated by White supremacy and the consequent hatred of Black people, immigrants, Jews, and Muslims. The leading concept driving such hatred was noted to be White genocide or the belief that white people are under threat of becoming the minority race, or worse, extinct. This notion has motivated thousands of unthinkable acts in our time. Lentin argues that race still matters because the things done in its name have caused many to meet premature death. In

addition, extreme racial violence is on the rise. Police fatally shoot three people per day, 38% of whom are Black (Campaign Zero, n.d.).

Bernal (2002) recognizing students of color as holders and creators of knowledge, looks at the experiences of Chicano and Chicana students. Bernal (2002) notes that students of color have been devalued, misrepresented, or omitted within formal educational settings. CRT and Latino critical race theory (Lat Crit) demonstrate how critical race-gendered epistemologies recognize students of color as holders and creators of knowledge. Using a qualitative lens and the lens of critical race theory and Latino critical theory, the experiences of Chicano/Chicana students explore how race and gender play a role in shaping their experiences and what the implications of such experiences mean in contemporary life.

Iverson (2007) says that access, disadvantage, and marketplace democracy coalesce to produce realities that situate people of color as outsiders to the Institution, at risk before and during participation in educational endeavors. The study aims to understand how racial inequality is reproduced through educational policies. Twenty-one diversity action plans from 20 U.S. Land grant Universities were reviewed. Part of what precipitated the need for the study was the disparity in graduation rates for students of color and White students. Iverson (2007) states, "The diversity project as we know it on our campuses is complicit in perpetuating the racial order as historically constructed." Further, he indicates that students of color experience a discourse of disadvantage as diversity plans continue to describe them as "at risk" for educational failure, being victims of hate crimes, discrimination, harassment, non-promotion, no advancement, and no tenure. Fueling the very concepts, they attempt to eradicate.

Martinez (2014) provides a nuanced critique of the "color-blind" and "post-racial" ideologies prevalent in contemporary society through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT). By

positioning CRT as a theoretical framework, Martinez effectively illuminates how race and racism persist in ostensibly post-racial contexts, revealing that the mere avoidance of racial discourse does not neutralize its effects. Instead, the choice to ignore racial differences actively reinforces the status quo, perpetuating deeply institutionalized injustices against racial minorities. Martinez argues that color-blindness—a perspective that disregards racial categories in the belief that ignoring race can eliminate discrimination—operates as a strategic discourse that veils structural inequities. This ideology assumes that the absence of overt racial language equates to the absence of racism itself, thus allowing systemic racial disparities to continue unchallenged. Furthermore, Martinez suggests that this post-racial notion, in which society imagines itself to have transcended racial divisions, reflects a profound disconnect from the lived realities of racial minorities. By ignoring the unique and persistent disadvantages experienced by these groups, a color-blind approach not only fails to address inequality but also actively contributes to the erasure of race as a factor in policy-making, social discourse, and institutional reform. Martinez's essay contributes to the CRT discourse by demonstrating how color-blind ideology systematically undermines racial justice efforts. Rather than fostering equality, it creates a social climate in which racial disparities are maintained under the guise of neutrality. The essay reinforces CRT's stance that race is a central and enduring component of social stratification and that acknowledgment of this reality is crucial for dismantling institutional racism. By critiquing post-racial and color-blind ideologies, Martinez's work underscores the importance of critical race frameworks in revealing and challenging the latent structures of inequality that persist in modern society.

Monarrez and Washington (2020) acknowledge that Black and Hispanic enrollment has increased over the last few years. However, minorities remain underrepresented in high-growth

industries such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Black graduates earn fewer high-paying degrees. Segregation within colleges harms equity of opportunity for Black and Hispanic students. This quantitative study revealed evidence of racial and ethnic stratification among U.S. colleges by field of study. For Black students, the most common major category is public administration and social services, meaning they are underrepresented in engineering, mathematics, and statistics majors. Findings endorse that segregation within colleges harms students of color. Additionally, segregation within colleges negatively impacts the number of higher-paying degrees awarded to students of color.

Dancy et al. (2018) argues that U.S. colleges and universities "must grapple with persistent engagements of Black bodies as property." Settler colonialism and anti-Blackness interpret the arrangement between historically White universities and Black people. The article concludes with a vision of what awareness of anti-Black and settler colonialism means for U.S. higher education. An additional note of interest is that they conclude that race is the foundation on which Western society's sociopolitical organization is built. White is seen as normal, and conversely, non-White is seen as abnormal. Anti-Blackness means sacrificing humanity at the hands of violence. One of the defining principles of anti-Blackness is the negation of Black humanity through violence. Anti-Blackness calls for utter contempt for and acceptance of violence against Black people.

Sleeter (2012) discusses how a teacher/professor's race becomes significant when a teacher/professor displays overt prejudice toward students of color, expects less of them than they do White students, or fails to understand them. The study used three theoretical perspectives: (a) conservativism racial inequality is normal/natural, (b) liberalism: people should be treated as individuals regardless of group membership, and (c) radical structuralism

continuous struggle across competing groups. This two-year ethnography examined thirty teachers, twenty-six of whom are White, who participated in the staff development program in multicultural education to illustrate how social class and gender life experiences inform White teachers' understanding of the social order that they use to conduct an understanding of race. A premise that arose was that how one interprets the basis of social inequality informs one's interpretation of multicultural education and what one chooses to address, remember, perceive as important, and attempts to use. The study was from two school districts, and the teachers had taught from preschool to sixth-grade students. The teachers were from eighteen schools, and at least one-third of all students were of color.

Allen (1992) examines how individual characteristics combine with institutional characteristics to assist or undermine academic achievement. The study examines how Black students' college success is influenced by campus context and student backgrounds while attending predominantly White colleges and universities. In addition, Allen attempted to explore how these outcomes are related to students' background characteristics, campus experiences, and individual personality orientation. Allen utilized a multivariate approach to investigate relationships between student outcomes of academic achievement, social involvement, educational background/goals, demographic characteristics, and personal adjustment to college and the college environment. The study was quantitative, with a random selection of participants via questionnaires returned to the University. The response rate was 30% sample size was 2,531, with 953 HBCUs and 1,578 to PWIs.

Summary

Race, while man-made and socially constructed, has been the one issue American society has not been successful at outmaneuvering. It remains a factor on nearly every front, including

academia. Black women come under scrutiny based on their social location and gender. Black signifying race and woman- being gender operative- have a history of being condemned to second-class citizenry, denied rights, and marginalized. Race is the foundation upon which Western society is built (Dancy et al., 2018). Minorities remain underrepresented STEM, resulting in fewer high-paying degrees awarded to students of color. Black students have been devalued, misrepresented, and omitted within formal educational settings (Bernal, 2002). When individual characteristics meet with institutional characteristics, they either assist or undermine the academic advancement of Black students. Campus context and individuals' backgrounds begin to shape Black students' experiences (Allen, 1992). It has been noted that racial inequality is reproduced through educational policy action plans. They are "complicit in perpetuating the racial order as historically constructed." (Iverson, 2007, p. ??). The notion of color-blindness, or ignoring difference, maintains and perpetuates deeply rooted institutionalized injustices perpetrated on Black students.

Two studies in this section did not align with this research. The first, Lentin (2020), looked at how terrorist actions, both domestic and abroad, are done in the name of racism. This topic veers left of this study and, therefore, added extraordinarily little to the knowledge pool about Black women's experiences in higher education. The second study was by Sleeter (1994), which discusses how teachers examine their feelings about race, class, and gender from their social location. This topic has implications for the mistreatment of students of color depending on what professionals discover about how they see the world and its people. Again, however, it needed to align with the study I set forth above.

Class

Walkerdine (2021) provides an in-depth examination of working-class students navigating elite academic environments, focusing on how classism shapes their social and psychological experiences. This study delves into the nuanced ways class disparities manifest and persist, even as more working-class individuals access higher education. Walkerdine argues that while elite institutions may open doors to more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, they often maintain deeply ingrained norms and cultural expectations that alienate or subtly marginalize working-class students.

The study reveals that working-class students frequently encounter microaggressions and social cues that distinguish them from their peers. These class markers—like distinct regional accents, tattoos, physique, skin pigmentation, and hairstyles—can lead to feelings of being out of place. Walkerdine contends that such markers are perceived as deviations from a normative identity often associated with the dominant, typically White, middle-to-upper-class student body at elite institutions. These "differences from the norm" mark working-class students as "other" in ways that influence both their self-perception and their interactions within academic settings. Moreover, Walkerdine's work highlights the psychological toll this class-based marginalization can take, including stress, imposter syndrome, and a sense of not fully belonging, despite academic success. The study underscores a paradox: although the presence of working-class students has increased, their integration and the broader transformation of institutional cultures remain limited. This lack of cultural change contributes to a scenario where, as students progress through higher levels of education—especially into advanced degrees like Ph.D. programs—the representation of working-class students diminishes significantly. Walkerdine attributes this trend to both the direct and indirect pressures exerted by elite institutions, which implicitly

uphold standards and behaviors that align with middle-to-upper-class norms. Walkerdine typically uses qualitative methodologies, such as in-depth interviews and narrative analysis, to explore the subjective experiences of working-class students. The findings often focus on the internalized pressures these students face, as well as the coping mechanisms they employ to navigate environments that were not designed with their backgrounds in mind.

Walkerdine contributes to the discourse on class in higher education by revealing how working-class students face unique challenges within elite institutions. The study not only underscores the resilience of these students but also calls for systemic changes within academic cultures to foster truly inclusive educational environments.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 primarily addresses discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin, but it does not explicitly include socioeconomic class as a protected category. This absence reflects a significant limitation in federal civil rights protections, as socioeconomic status intersects profoundly with race, gender, and other identities, influencing access to opportunities, resources, and rights. The omission of class as a protected status has critical implications, particularly when considering how race, class, and gender intersect to shape individuals' experiences in education, employment, housing, and healthcare. For instance, race and class are deeply intertwined in the U.S., where people of color are disproportionately represented in lower-income brackets due to longstanding systemic barriers such as redlining, limited access to quality education, and employment discrimination. Without explicit protections based on class, individuals from lower-income backgrounds often encounter discrimination that is unaddressed by civil rights laws, particularly in areas where class bias impacts hiring, pay, promotion, and treatment in workplaces.

Similarly, women, particularly women of color, face compounded disadvantages due to both gender and socioeconomic status. The intersection of class and gender discrimination can be seen in wage gaps, occupational segregation, and access to family leave and childcare. Women in lower-paying jobs are often excluded from workplace protections and benefits that would support economic mobility, and when discrimination arises due to their economic position, current civil rights protections may fall short of providing recourse. In education, students from lower-income backgrounds—who are often also from racially marginalized groups—face numerous obstacles, including underfunded schools, lack of access to college preparatory resources, and implicit bias. Because class is not a protected category, these students are less shielded from systemic discrimination that reinforces barriers to upward mobility, which in turn perpetuates cycles of poverty. This lack of protection becomes particularly relevant in elite educational environments, as Walkerdine (2021) notes, where working-class students are subjected to classism and subtle forms of discrimination that go unaddressed by civil rights statutes.

The absence of class protections in the Civil Rights Act illustrates a gap in addressing the full spectrum of systemic discrimination, especially as it impacts those who experience layered disadvantages across race, gender, and class. For a more equitable society, advocates argue that federal law should consider expanding civil rights protections to include socioeconomic status, recognizing that class, like race and gender, is an integral factor in shaping individuals' opportunities and well-being. As a result, there is a void of formal recognition of class and how much some students suffer due to class status. *Class misnomers* are known problems that have gone without redress for some time. The study suggests that a new conversation about social

class can bring a renewed understanding of how it can be better protected rather than ignored as it is today in higher education.

Intersectionality

Zamani (2003) provides statistical data on the enrollment of marginalized groups and projections for enrollment to 2050, indicating a steady enrollment increase and the ultimate majority status of people of color. The study argues that more attention should be paid to African Americans' academic, social, and political positions instead of complex intersections of race, class, and gender. The article recognizes the paradoxical dilemma of Black women due to their social location and how this is particularly unstable in the United States. Finally, the wage gap between Black and White women makes it necessary to assess which educational environment fosters and which inhibits access to African American women. Zamani points to the strengths of HBCUs and single-sex institutions that are more culturally based educational institutions that provide opportunities for academic and social growth, leadership development, and enrollment to degree completion to have greater cultural congruity and life satisfaction than predominantly White institutions.

Henry et al. (2011) acknowledge that participation in post-secondary education has improved for Black women; however, they still lag compared to other denominations in enrollment and completion rates. Using the lens of Black feminist thought as a theoretical framework, a deeper understanding of factors perpetuating the underrepresentation of Black women in higher education became clearer. It is noted that very few studies acknowledge "within-group differences (class, gender, age, sexual orientation, and immigration status). Findings were that success was related to persistence rather than satisfaction or well-being.

Capudilupo and Kim (2014) recruited Women of color for this qualitative study through community centers in a major metropolitan city and represented diverse backgrounds. They participated in six focus groups to explore race, ethnicity, culture, discrimination, and body image. The study aimed to understand better how race and gender interface with and inform body image. The data were analyzed using grounded theory as the lens of interpretation. The study's issues centered on hair, skin, attitude, physique, Interpersonal influence, experiences of oppression, microaggressions, and media messages.

Morales (2014) conducted a qualitative study of sixty-one participants who were taken through in-depth interviews focusing on microaggressions, which are subtle racial insults that Black students encounter in Higher Education. Black students described the daily insults and slights they encountered and the erroneous notions of who they were. Looking at the microaggressions that Black students face in higher education, it was noted that Black students were seen as exotic, hypersexual, aggressive, and lower-class individuals. The microaggressions are tied to racialized, gendered, and classed ideas about Black people.

Hartung (1991) suggests that the typical student is no longer a young white male. Teaching social stratification is important because students learn about the intersectionality of race, class, and gender and how they impact our lives and shape opportunities. In addition, they learn about models of social class, mobility, origins of inequality, inclusiveness, and diversity. Whites do not always recognize their privilege even though they are the group to which other groups are compared for normalcy. Most White people do not consider themselves as belonging to a race. White people are not forced to think about race daily.

Haynes et al. (2020) use intersectionality as a methodology rather than a theoretical framework and examine studies on Black women in higher education. The purpose of the 30-

year study is to see how other researchers have applied the use of intersectionality in their studies. The researcher used a three-dimensional, intersectional framework (structural, political, representational) to examine the topic. Structural intersectionality emphasizes multipole forms of structural oppression (racism, classism, sexism), situating and shaping the experiences of Black women. Political identity ensures that Black women remain powerless. Representational intersectionality looks at how Black women's lives are located in public discourses, often in detrimental and stereotypical ways. It exposes how controlling images (sapphire, mammy, jezebel, super-woman) reinforce racist and sexist stereotypes of Black women. Additionally, Black women are viewed as angry, loud, violent, hypersexual, and super-human. These stereotypes can carry real-life consequences for Black women. The methodology was to review 680-Abstracts and sort them down into four categories: 1) critical framework lens -164; 2) intersectionality in title -22; 3) Relevant words -30; and 4) Fell outside study criteria -464 (93 abstracts were eliminated because they were not about Black women).

Baumgartner and Johnson-Bailey (2010) explores the intricacies of researching within one's own culture and addresses issues that bring conflict versus those that are unifying. It was noted that specific issues arise when a Black woman researches and interviews other Black women. There tends to be an assumption that all Black women share the same ideas and dislikes, but there is no such thing as monolithic regarding the broad experiences and ideas that Black women hold. Tensions arose regarding color and class, while race and gender were unifying. The study aimed to examine the educational narratives of reentry Black women to determine how the dynamics of a larger society impact their lives. The methodology was narrative analysis, and the lens interpretation was Black feminist thought. Their sample consisted of graduates and undergraduates between 31 and 54.

Summary

Hartung (1991) suggests that the typical student is no longer a young, White male, as the number of students of color entering higher education is increasing. However, Black women remain underrepresented in higher education (Henry et al., 2011). Race, class, and gender (intersectionality) became oppressive in informing body image while enduring microaggressions for Black women in higher education (Capudilupo & Kim, 2014). Microaggressions are subtle insults encountered daily by Black women in higher education. They are tied to racial-gendered and classed notions of Black women. Three studies were related but did not align with the core issues of this research. The first was Zamani (2003) who argues that more attention should be paid to African Americans' academic, social, and political positions than the complexities of race, class, and gender. The second, Haynes et al. (2020), conducted a 30-year study to research how intersectionality has been applied to various studies over the years. Finally, Baumgartner and Johnson-Bailey (2010) examined how conflict can arise when one researches their culture. He noted that some issues are unifying while others create conflict within the group. Each study, while fascinating and even essential, veered off from the central questions of this study.

Climate

Mirza (2006) completed a study in Britain that suggests that higher education is "hideously White" and not extremely diverse. In climate and policy, Black women face emotional and psychological costs that make attending nearly unbearable for people of color. One voice described attending this way, "The world I inhabit is an academic, white world. In this white world, I am a freshwater fish that swims in seawater. I feel the weight of the water on my body." The burden of embodying difference as an outsider within occupies the minds and time of many professionals gathered to strategize on diversity and inclusion. However, in the face of

boundless rhetoric, there is yet little movement on the ground to change the current state of things. Black women continue to face the brunt of the opposition to difference.

Allen (1988) reports that historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) offer psychological well-being and spiritual affinity at the cost of less favorable physical circumstances. Predominantly White colleges and universities (PWIs) offer better physical environments and greater bureaucratic efficiency at the expense of less satisfying interpersonal relationships, self-affirmation, and less peace of mind. The question arises whether Black students should have to choose between the two or whether these qualities should exist at both HBCUs and PWI, making such a decision unnecessary.

Adams (2009) examines the impact of the academic climate on Black women in academia. The emergence of Black women in graduate schools in the last 50 years has increased. The barriers to and limitations imposed within traditional predominantly White institutions prevail and have consequences for Black women. The study's central questions are:

1. What do Black women experience in graduate school?
2. What commonalities exist among Black women in graduate school?
3. What factors pose barriers for Black Women?
4. What factors do the respondents specifically identify as contributing to the adverse academic climate for Black women?

The theoretical framework utilized in Black feminist thought which focuses on racism and sexism and self-reflection for critical narrative analysis.

Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2022) questions how Black women have fostered a sense of belonging in higher educational institutions that continue to marginalize them. The study aims to

envision educational access and thrive in an environment of acceptance and support for Black women in higher educational institutions.

Summary

Allen (1988) suggests that in choosing where to go to school, Black women usually have a choice between attending a PWI or a HBCU. The issue becomes what they give up in either case and whether they should have to make such an impactful choice. For example, if one chooses a PWI, giving up a sense of well-being, how do they foster a sense of belonging (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). Adams (2009) attempted to answer this question by examining the experiences of Black women and completing in-depth interviews that speak to the barriers Black women must hurdle to reach success.

Experiences

Winkle-Wagner (2009) says inequality persists among college students despite ongoing efforts to combat the issue. Students of color face alienation, stereotyping, low expectations, and lingering racism. This study examines the experiences of African American collegiate women and the identity-related pressures they face. Predominantly White institutions deny African American women the chance to determine their sense of self. Sister Circles" highlights the voices of Black women as they share their experiences at PWIs and is used as a relatively new approach to studying identity. Black women speak openly and freely about pressures and tensions that exist for them at these institutions.

Williams et al. (2022) explore the narratives of six Black women in "Black Girl Magic: Identity Development of Black first-gen college women," a qualitative study where minority status, race and gender, and first-generation college student status intersect to generate emergent themes. Findings include (a) constant identity struggles related to ultimate success as first-

generation students; (b) most felt institutional betrayal due to discrimination; (c) all the women in the study identified coping mechanisms and strategies to function within the predominantly White Institution.

Patterson-Stevens et al. (2017) utilize Black feminist thought in the phenomenological study, Black Doctoral Women: Exploring Barriers and Facilitators of Success in Graduate School; they studied Black women pursuing or recently receiving their doctoral degree. The framework used was Black feminist thought, which again provides that living as a Black woman gives one a unique feminist viewpoint considering the social location of Black women. The women used pseudonyms and spoke about their experiences in interviews. For example, one fascinating discussion from Cinnamon Nut was about racist gatekeepers who, like my high school dean, sat her down and told her they did not feel she had what it takes to enter the Ph.D. program. In addition, there are many powerful examples of participants who felt that faculty and administrators were attempting to lead them out of the program.

Gaston-Spears (2006) investigates how Black women cope in corporate America regarding inclusivity, pay equity, self-actualization, and promotion. Through the voices of seven Black women executives in Central Illinois, Gaston-Spears uncovers the coping mechanisms employed by Black executives who say that even with a prestigious title, they feel helpless to be able to bring others along, or they become weary of feeling like "the bad guy" when they have to speak up at board meetings and explain how a new policy adversely and predominantly affects people of color. They say they are still powerless when determining what will happen and who can be hired, fired, and promoted. The study is qualitative and utilizes a unique journaling exercise where participants journaled for 6-months of their lives, which did not have to be

consecutive days, but instead only when their unique social location or the intersection of race, class, and gender caused them to have to consider their marginalized status.

Woodson (1933/2023) informs on discrimination in education and provides a historical view that is still relevant and profound today. He begins by asking the question: Do those who receive an education get prepared to face the ordeal before them, or are they unconsciously contributing to their undoing by perpetuating the regime of the oppressor? The oppressor crushes and depresses the spark of genius in the Black person by making him feel that his race will never (amount) measure up to the standards of other people. The Negro thus educated, is a hopeless liability of the race. The difficulty is that the educated Negro must move and live among his people whom he has been taught to despise. "When you control a man's thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions Woodson, (1933/2023)," Woodson suggests that the educated Negro has been taught to have an attitude of contempt toward his people, look at race only as a problem, be taught inferiority in every class, to see other Negroes as non-entities. Woodson describes the indoctrination of hopelessness and the worst type of lynching.

Thomas and Jackson (2007) present a compelling historical analysis of the educational trajectories of Black girls and women in the United States, tracing their journey from the establishment of the first schools post-slavery to their ongoing experiences within predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Their work underscores both the resilience of Black women in pursuing education and the enduring challenges they face due to systemic racial and gender-based discrimination. By highlighting both historical and contemporary struggles, the study draws attention to the complex barriers that Black women have had to overcome in accessing educational opportunities and achieving parity within academic environments. The authors outline the origins of Black women's education, starting with the post-emancipation era, when

formerly enslaved individuals sought literacy and education as a means of empowerment and social mobility. Early educational efforts were supported by Black communities and facilitated by African American educators and leaders, who played critical roles in establishing schools and advocating for the education of Black women. These pioneers are celebrated in the study as foundational figures who not only valued literacy but also saw it as essential to achieving broader social justice goals.

Thomas and Jackson explore the evolution of educational opportunities for Black women, pointing out that, although access has improved over time, significant obstacles persist. As more Black women entered PWIs, they encountered forms of marginalization, including exclusion from resources, lack of representation among faculty, and cultural isolation. These challenges are compounded by racial and gender stereotypes that Black women often confront within academic settings, which can undermine their sense of belonging and impact their educational experiences.

Their work illuminates how this marginalization operates not only at the institutional level—through lack of support, representation, and inclusivity—but also at the individual level, as Black women grapple with identity and resilience in spaces that were not designed with their success in mind. By framing Black women's educational struggles within a historical context, Thomas and Jackson's research offers valuable insights into both the progress and setbacks Black women experience in education. It emphasizes the need for continued advocacy, institutional reform, and cultural awareness to support the success of Black women in academia and beyond. The study contributes to a broader understanding of how the legacies of racism and sexism still impact Black women's educational opportunities and underscores the importance of honoring the achievements of early African American educators who laid the groundwork for future generations.

Henry (2017) Henry (2017) offers a critical examination of the experiences of Black women in university settings, conceptualizing these institutions as "ivory towers"—spaces of privilege and seclusion that are disconnected from the realities and lived experiences of marginalized groups. Henry uses the term "ebony women" to represent Black female students who, despite their enrollment in higher education, face systematic exclusion and marginalization. The study highlights the challenges these women face, often leading to forfeited opportunities for academic success and self-actualization, as they navigate environments that were not designed to support their needs, identities, or ambitions. Henry draws on critical race theory and intersectional feminist perspectives to analyze how universities, as predominantly White and privileged institutions, systematically exclude and alienate Black women. The "ivory tower" metaphor suggests that these institutions maintain a culture of privilege that not only lacks inclusivity but also perpetuates a disconnect from the practicalities and diverse experiences that shape the lives of marginalized students. Black women, or "ebony women" in Henry's framework, are often left unsupported and misunderstood, as their experiences of racial and gender-based marginalization are rarely addressed within these academic settings.

Henry posits that the absence of culturally relevant support systems and representation within university faculty, curricula, and resources leads many Black women to struggle with self-actualization—defined as the realization of one's full potential. The lack of institutional support and recognition exacerbates feelings of isolation and alienation, which can prevent these students from thriving academically and personally. Henry argues that this forfeiture of potential is not due to a lack of capability but rather to the university's failure to create an environment that affirms Black women's identities, strengths, and contributions. Through in-depth interviews with Black women at universities, Henry explores their experiences with institutional culture, faculty

interactions, and campus resources, while also examining the personal coping mechanisms they employed to navigate these often-hostile environments.

Walkington (2017) examines sociological scholarship from 1995-2015 with a focus on workplace discrimination, unequal access to resources, and strategy for resistance. Black women have unique experiences at the intersection of race, class, and gender. The goal is to see how interlocking systems of oppression operate in Black women's lives and how these constructed identities result in social inequality for Black women. Black women must exist in an ideology of domination. Ideas about Black women become manipulated by exploiting existing symbols and creating new controlling images. Findings included that Black women are both racialized and gendered in professional settings. In addition, they experience a double-blind, double minority status and unequal access to economic support.

Bennett et al. (2021) examine Aboriginal Australia and Indigenous people's struggle for equality, sovereignty, and human rights. Indigenous freedom has been threatened throughout Australia's history of colonization. One of the study's primary themes is the importance of sovereignty and self-determination for Indigenous peoples. Bennett et al. argue that policies aimed at improving Indigenous welfare often fail because they are developed without genuine input from Indigenous communities. The authors advocate for policies that recognize Indigenous governance and prioritize Indigenous voices in decision-making processes, especially regarding land rights, cultural preservation, and economic development.

In education, the study examines how current systems often ignore Indigenous perspectives and history, perpetuating a narrative that is disconnected from Indigenous experiences. Bennett et al. emphasize the need for culturally responsive educational practices that honor Indigenous knowledge systems, languages, and cultural practices. They recommend

that educational curricula be co-designed with Indigenous leaders and educators to ensure that Indigenous students see themselves and their histories represented accurately and respectfully in their schooling. a mix of qualitative methods, such as interviews, focus groups, and participatory action research, allowing Indigenous communities to directly contribute their perspectives. Bennett et al. likely engaged with Indigenous leaders, activists, educators, and community members to gather insights on the impact of policies and to develop recommendations grounded in Indigenous experiences.

The findings underscore that Indigenous Australians continue to experience significant social and economic disadvantages, largely due to policies and practices rooted in colonial frameworks. These disadvantages span areas such as health, education, employment, and legal rights. Bennett et al. emphasize that despite increased awareness and some policy shifts, meaningful change has been slow, and Indigenous communities often bear the brunt of tokenistic or underfunded initiatives. The study calls for a reorientation of policy-making toward genuine partnerships with Indigenous peoples, rooted in respect for Indigenous sovereignty and guided by the principles of equity and human rights.

King (1995) asserts that little attention has been given to the African American doctoral woman, and her contributions have been ignored or undervalued. They have had to endure isolation in predominantly White institutions and deal with the double bind of sexism and racism from their unique social location. The study, surveying 106 African American doctoral recipients—of whom 20 were women—reveals that Black women face a "double bind" of racism and sexism. These women often find themselves in environments that are not only predominantly White but also structured around norms and practices that do not accommodate or affirm their identities. As first-generation college students, these women faced additional challenges, such as

limited access to mentorship, resources, and guidance throughout their academic journeys. Their attendance at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) for their undergraduate education provided them with a supportive foundation; however, this support did not typically extend into their doctoral programs at PWIs, where they encountered a lack of community and mentorship.

King's findings reveal that these Black women often experienced isolation and exclusion within their doctoral programs. They reported feeling marginalized by both peers and faculty, who may not have fully understood or valued their perspectives. This social and academic isolation was compounded by racial and gender-based stereotypes that negatively impacted their relationships and sense of belonging within the academic community. The findings call for academic institutions to recognize and address the unique barriers experienced by Black women in higher education. King advocates for increased support structures, such as mentorship programs, networking opportunities, and the hiring of diverse faculty, to provide African American women with resources that affirm their identities and recognize their contributions. Additionally, King recommends fostering more inclusive and culturally aware academic environments that actively counteract the racism and sexism these women face.

Corbin et al. (2018) Corbin et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative study to explore the experiences of racial battle fatigue among 13 Black women navigating predominantly White institutions (PWIs) and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). This study allowed participants to share personal narratives and reflections on their experiences, using storytelling as a primary methodological approach. This approach is significant as it centers the voices of Black women, providing them with space to recount their lived realities in their own words. By focusing on storytelling, Corbin et al. prioritized an intimate understanding of how racial

microaggressions, stereotypes, and media portrayals impact Black women's self-perception, identity, and mental health, particularly under the "White gaze."

Summary

These studies inform on the status of Black women in academia and indicate that inequality persists. Black women still face alienation, stereotypes, lowered expectations, and racism while being denied the chance for self-definition. The psychological tensions and silencing of Black women, labeling, and stereotypical ideologies perpetuated through mass media become draining and create racial battle fatigue. Adams's (2009) study reviews the history of women in academia and the rise of Black women in academia and tries to analyze the barriers and limitations imposed by predominantly White institutions. Most confirmed marginalization, such as invisibility, having their contributions devalued, and the need for coping mechanisms, Black women faced "racial battle fatigue" from the constant need to educate others about their culture or who they are as opposed to stereotypical ideologies. In addition, they explain how changes in their organization might adversely impact one segment of the population over another. Many of these studies are closely aligned with this proposed research.

Woodson (1933/2023) says that the educational system has turned the Black man (Woman) against himself by teaching him to despise Black people because they are dirty and worthless and will never amount to anything or live up to the standards of Whites. Even though the Black man has been taught to hate himself, he must live among his people and thus becomes a burden to his race. This study does not align with this research. Still, it sheds light on how effective institutionalized racism can be when the very people it is meant to marginalize are indoctrinated into the beliefs of an anti-Black system of oppression. Bennett et al. (2021) is situated in Australia, where the struggle for equality, freedom, and independence has been

ongoing for many years. The study recommends a policy leading to more autonomy for

Australia's people. Loots et al. 2016, argues for a need to use a holistic approach to mapping

information about Black women in higher education. The capabilities approach, which is a

normative approach to human welfare, is discussed, and it relies on the actual capabilities of a

person to achieve their well-being rather than simply having the freedom or right to do so. This

particular study was difficult to relate to when the foundation of Western society is predicated

upon race Dancy et al., 2018.

 This chapter presented a brief synopsis of existing literature on Black women in higher

education and how race, class, and gender coalesce to impact their success. It successfully sets

up the need for studying the core questions:

1. Why are there so few Black women with doctoral degrees?

2. What are the barriers to completing the degree program?

3. What are the salient qualities Black women see as necessary for graduation?

4. What support systems were most valued while pursuing this degree program?

In chapter three, we will review the methodologies employed in answering these

important questions, keeping in mind the three lenses being utilized: Black feminist thought,

critical race theory, and intersectionality that together empower Black women to create

knowledge in the face of society with the deep-seated racial bias inherent in our legal system and

institutions as we examine overlapping systems of oppression.

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

Black women have been entering higher education at numbers higher than ever before. Yet, their experiences maneuvering the educational terrain from a unique social location go undocumented (Winkle-Wagner, 2015), and the vast majority are not graduating at the same rate of entry (Donovan & Guillory, 2017). The purpose of this study on Black women in higher education: how race, class, and gender coalesce to impact success, is to ascertain why graduation rates for Black women do not reflect this increase. From the critical self-study of seven degreed Black women, through their experiences and self-reflection, come revelations concerning inclusivity in higher education, the impact of race, class, and gender on success, and support systems and personal attitudes necessary while in pursuit of higher education at predominantly White institutions. Additionally, understanding how best to counter microaggressions unique to Black women's social positionality as racialized and genderized individuals.

There are four central questions to this study. The first is: Why are there so few Black women with doctorate degrees? This question is supported by existing research which shows that statistical data indicates there are between 1 and 3% of Black women who hold doctorates in the United States (Coker et al., 2018). These numbers are extremely concerning and justify the need for additional research. The second is: What are the barriers to completing the degree program? Studies indicate that there are racial barriers that hinder Black women from graduating as well as a lack of inclusivity, appropriate support systems, and tenured Black professors to provide guidance (Coker et al., 2018), which carries consequences for Black women seeking higher education. The third is: What are the salient qualities Black women see as necessary for graduation? Previous studies suggest that Black women require self-reliance and family support

as other support systems are not generally in place to assist them with academic success. Additionally, religion, spirituality, and resiliency contribute to their success (Knetge, 2018). The fourth is: What support systems were most valued while pursuing this degree program? Studies show that family can be an excellent source of support for Black women pursuing post-secondary education. Family is one of the major themes that show up as crucial to Black women's success in pursuing higher education. Family support and instilling the value of education, family social circles, and affirmations that reject notions of inferiority, serve to motivate and reassure Black women in their journey. The significance of this study is found in the emboldened way in which it addresses gaps in the existing literature where Black women have either been overlooked or used only in comparison to other groups. Giving voice to an otherwise underrepresented segment of the population is powerful and empowering.

Research Purpose and Question

The pursuit of higher education has long been heralded as a pathway to personal and professional success, offering individuals the opportunity to expand their knowledge, skills, and socio-economic mobility. However, the experiences of marginalized groups within this educational landscape are often fraught with unique challenges that intersect with race, class, and gender. This study aims to delve into the intricate web of factors that shape the academic journeys of Black women in higher education, with a particular focus on understanding how the intersections of race, class, and gender contribute to or hinder their success.

The purpose of this research is to critically examine the multifaceted dynamics influencing the educational trajectories of Black women in higher education, exploring how societal structures, institutional policies, and interpersonal relationships intersect to shape their experiences. Figure 1 illuminates some of the many factors that contribute to the experiences of

Black women (race, class, gender, intersectionality,climate, and experiences). By undertaking a comprehensive analysis, this study seeks to contribute valuable insights into the challenges faced by Black women within the higher education system and understand the ways in which these challenges impact their success.

The central question guiding this study is: How do the intersections of race, class, and gender influence the academic experiences and success of Black women in higher education? To address this question, the research will investigate various dimensions, including but not limited to:

1. Structural Barriers: What systemic and institutional barriers exist for Black women in higher education, and how do these barriers contribute to or impede their academic success?

2. Societal Expectations: How do societal expectations and stereotypes related to race, class, and gender shape the educational experiences of Black women, and to what extent do these expectations influence their outcomes?

3. Identity and Empowerment: In what ways do Black women in higher education navigate and construct their identities, and how does a sense of empowerment impact their ability to overcome challenges and achieve success?

4. Intersectionality and Policy Implications: How can an intersectional understanding of the experiences of Black women inform policy recommendations to create more inclusive and equitable higher education environments?

By addressing these questions, this study aspires to contribute a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by Black women in higher education and provide a foundation for future

research and policy initiatives aimed at fostering an environment conducive to their academic success.

Figure 1

Black Women in Higher Education: How Race, Class, and Gender Coalesce to Impact Success

Black Women in Higher Education: How Race, Class, and Gender Coalesce to Impact Success

RACE
#2

CLASS
#3

CLIMATE
#6

BLACK WOMEN
#1

EXPERIENCE
#7

GENDER
#4

INTERSECTIONALITY
#5
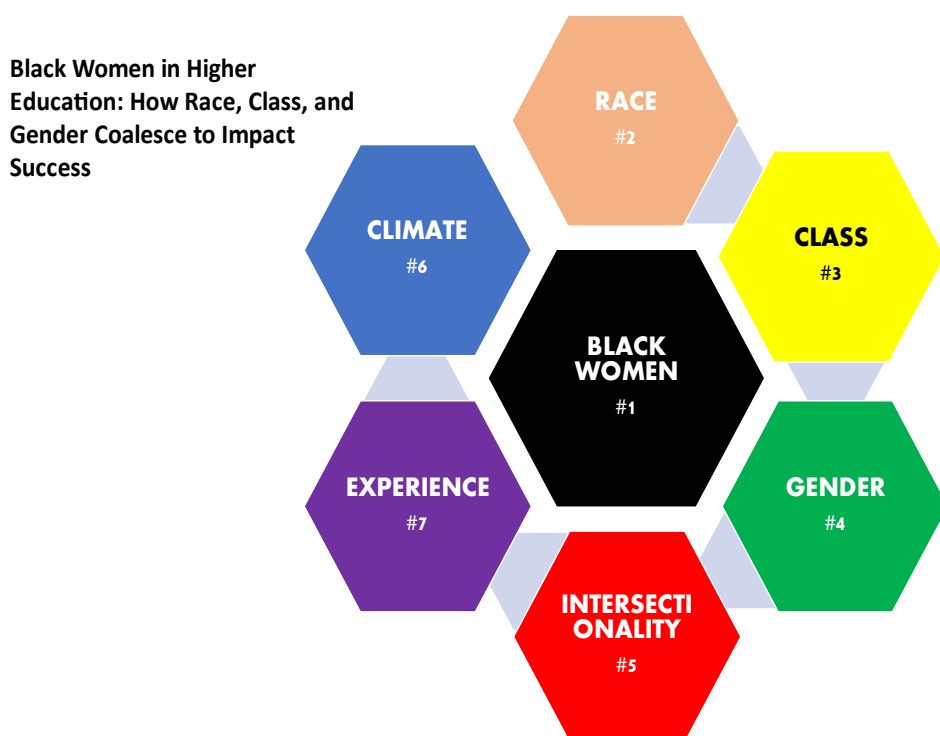
Thesis Statement

In light of the escalating enrollment of Black women in higher education, surpassing historical figures, a disconcerting incongruity persists as their experiences within the educational landscape remain underexplored and their graduation rates fail to commensurately rise (Donovan & Guillory, 2017; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). This study aims to unravel the underlying reasons

behind the observed disparity between entry and graduation rates for Black women in higher education. Further to ascertain what barriers impede Black women's academic success (Coker et al., 2018). There is a need for Black women's perspectives to contribute to the ongoing discourse on instituting vital changes that would more effectively support Black women in higher education (Coker et al., 2018). Degreed Black women must weigh in on what makes the difference and the salient qualities they rely on in their pursuit of higher education (Coker et al., 2018). Black women have the lowest graduation rate from higher educational institutions of any other racial or gendered group, second only to Black men (Coker et al., 2018). In 2017, it was believed that only 1% of Black women held doctorate degrees (Coker et al., 2018). Black women grapple with a myriad of obstacles, including stereotypical ideologies, controlling images, microaggressions, harassment, and socio-structural stressors, all of which intricately complicate their educational experiences (Knetge, 2018).

Research Methodology

The methodology employed in this action research study is a phenomenological, qualitative, transformative action research that investigates the reasons Black women attribute to their success in higher education as well as the barriers that attempt to derail progress toward degree completion. Research, to quote Zora Neal Hurston (1979), noted author and sociologist, is "formalized curiosity; it is poking and prying with a purpose." Mertler (2020) defined it as "any systematic inquiry conducted by anyone with a vested interest in the teaching and learning process or environment to gather information about how their particular schools operate, to improve the quality effectiveness" (p. 5b). Action research combines theory and practice through change and reflection in an immediate problematic situation within a mutually acceptable ethical framework (Avison et al., 1999). According to Swann (2002), it is designed for human

consumption and is not bound by the quantitative "certainties" of the physical world. It is used to examine the content and outcomes of genuine challenges within society through structured inquiry processes that include formulation of research questions, collection of empirical data, and the subsequent analysis of the data (Carver & Klein, 2013). Action research requires the research process to be made visible. It demands accountability and visual self-evaluation. It does what documented research should do…change reality (Swann, 2002). Phenomenological research derives its philosophical content through the lived experiences of individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon from differing viewpoints and experienced similar outcomes. Their narratives hold the potential to illuminate the reasons behind the limited success of many Black women in pursuing higher education, examining barriers, evaluating the effectiveness of support systems both within and outside the campus community, and identifying key qualities that played a pivotal role in shaping their individual experiences. Qualitative investigation allows for a broader range of intake and interpretation of experience and does not limit in ways that quantitative inquiry might in the wake of human experience. It is believed that when exploring the complexity of the trilogy of race, class, and gender, qualitative methodology yields the most appropriate insight and inferences from combined data investigation particularly when it is firsthand, reflective, and subjective knowledge, Qualitative study is concerned with understanding social phenomena from the participant's perspective (Ngozwana, 2018). It focuses on participants' experiences and the meanings given by them to that experience. Qualitative inquiry allows for a deeper exploration of complex phenomena (Moen, 2006). It promotes the idea of individuals being empowered to create knowledge as they interpret the world around them (Chappelle, 2022). Finally, transformative inquiry suggests that the topic of interest, once researched, should result in a paradigm shift or break existing scientific ideologies. Together, the

revelations from the lived experiences of these seven Black women who occupy a unique social location have the potential to illuminate the voice of an often-overlooked segment of society and elicit responses with the potential to impact academia in the areas of inclusivity, sense of self, and meaningful support.

Research Methodology

There are four specific research design approaches incorporated in this study that support the review of race, class, and gender, the first being intersectionality which allows the examination of overlapping systems of oppression and helps to elucidate the nuanced experiences of Black women in higher education. Intersectionality offers a comprehensive exploration of the barriers they face, the support structures influencing their journey, and the transformative impact of their resilience within these intersecting contexts. It is the ideal methodology for qualitative study. Black feminist thought (BFT) living as a Black woman (occupying a unique social location as racialized, genderized individuals) creates a Black feminist consciousness recognizing the experiences of Black women (Hill Collins, 2000). CRT takes into consideration racial bias inherent in our legal system and institutions, as they were designed without people of color in mind (Delgado, & Stefanic, 2023). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), discuss the advantages and disadvantages of critical race theory, suggesting that it draws attention to systemic racial inequalities and discrimination that may not be immediately apparent. CRT strongly emphasizes centering the experiences and voices of marginalized racial groups, allowing their perspectives to shape discussions and policies. It also helps researchers critically analyze how race intersects with social factors such as class, gender, and sexuality. The disadvantages center on the controversial criticism of political and public discourse as CRT makes race identity essential to the problem being examined. Standpoint theory (ST) is a

theoretical framework that emphasizes the idea that an individual's social position or standpoint within society significantly influences their perception, understanding, and production of knowledge. This perspective acknowledges that different social groups occupy distinct positions in the social hierarchy, and these positions shape the way individuals experience and interpret the world. In the context of Black women, standpoint theory becomes a powerful tool for acknowledging and validating their unique perspectives as holders and producers of knowledge (Hill Collins, 1990).

Research Context

Research Setting

The contextual framework of this study provides for a less controlled environment, as participants, having earned their doctorate, reflect on their experiences while pursuing a doctoral degree. Specifically, participants were provided a journal that would comfortably fit in a handbag, for ease of transport, and encouraged to take charge of when, where, and how they chose to reflect on their experiences. It was important to this researcher that participants felt empowered in every way to share their stories. Having autonomy over the creation of knowledge was the first step in the process. In describing the research setting, it becomes necessary to elaborate on the methods utilized for gathering data for this project, which were journaling, questionnaires, Wise Woman Webinars, and interviews. The use of varying methods for data collection brought versatility to the research context as well as valued cross-referencing of data that was visible in different contexts. Each method for data collection was administered in a place of the participant's choosing, as the materials for journaling were mailed to each participant, interviews, and Wise Woman Webinars were scheduled, and online meetings, leaving it to the participant to join from a location of their choice.

Participant Recruitment

Recruitment of participants based on the criteria for the study; having a doctorate, being a Black woman, and graduating from a predominantly White institution, proved to be quite the task, leading me to deduce that there indeed exists a shortage of Black women with doctoral degree status to respond to such a research study. The seven women who ultimately became the subjects of this study represent a diverse range of experiences relative to the research objectives and, come highly recommended, and greatly appreciated. These seven women were recruited in several ways, initially, through family referrals, chain sampling (or knowing one qualifying individual who refers you to another), acquaintances, asking friends who then invited their friends, and making new acquaintances at social events. Individuals were recruited from various states and backgrounds. Some Ph.D., and some Juris Doctorate. There was even one medical doctor, a pediatrician, who was interested; however, the connection was not made in time to take advantage of the opportunity. Family members provided the names of several friends and acquaintances they believed might be interesting. I had the names of a few people in mind, and a long-time role model and parental figure also offered suggestions. I immediately contacted each by phone, some were reached upon first attempts, others were left messages, and follow-up was necessary. I generally waited until the weekend to call in hopes that I would find them home, relaxed and not bothered by work disruption. I utilized my cover letter and journaling guidelines to explain the study and what would be required if they chose to participate. As soon as I had a favorable response from five prospects, I mailed the initial packet information. I continued to follow up with others and also received additional leads through the five potential participants. There was at least one prospect who never returned my call, two others who suggested they were too old to remember their journeys, and another who because of their current position saw it as a

conflict, There was also another prospect whom I was sure would help out but she said she just started a new job and felt that she would not have the time to do my study justice. Suffice it to say that I was turned down by more people than are part of the study.

Research Participants

In the mosaic of perspectives that shape this study, the voices and narratives of our research participants serve as vibrant threads weaving together a tapestry of experiences, insights, and resilience. This section introduces the diverse group of individuals who graciously shared their stories, providing a crucial foundation for the exploration of Black women's encounters within predominantly white institutions. Through their lived experiences, challenges, and triumphs, these participants illuminate the intricate intersections of race, class, and gender, offering valuable contributions to the ongoing discourse on higher education and societal structures. Each participant emerges as a unique storyteller, enriching the fabric of this research with the depth and authenticity of their individual journeys.

Dr. Carla hails from a small but wealthy Midwest town just hours from Chicago, IL., that boasts a charming blend of a thriving educational community with a stable economy anchored by Fortune 500 companies. This metropolitan area offers a balanced lifestyle, with a strong emphasis on family values and community engagement. Its cultural scene is enriched by local theaters, museums, and events, creating a welcoming environment for residents and visitors alike. Dr. Carla was recruited during a social outing where we came in contact. I have known Dr. Carla for some time. She is stunning to the eye, with a smile that lights up a room. Dr. Carla has even-toned brown skin, is slender, is a tasteful dresser, and holds prominence within her community. She always encourages, speaks the king's English, and is extremely motivated and talented. Dr. Carla is married and has one child. I know her to be caring, generous, and always a

delight to be around. I appreciate the encouragement she shared with me when she learned that I was seeking my doctorate. She also said," require that they call you Doctor because not using your title is simply another way some will try to undermine the importance of your achievements." Oh, she is all about recognizing how far we have come as a people.

Dr. Katheryn Love is from a dynamic economic hub, serving as a major transportation and business center in the Southeastern United States. Renowned for its diverse cultural offerings, including historic sites, museums, and a vibrant music scene, which attracts a young and diverse population. The city's metropolitan allure is complemented by its world-class dining, shopping, and a rich tapestry of neighborhoods, making it a sought-after destination for those seeking both professional opportunities and a vibrant urban lifestyle. Dr. Love purchased a second home in the area to be able to spend more time with her family and is someone I had knowledge of and who was also highly recommended by several family members. She is a fair-skinned Black woman, tall and curvaceous, and beautiful inside and out. Her joy is infectious, and I love it when she smiles through her slightly freckled face. Her demeanor is relaxed and calming. She is forward-thinking and extremely intelligent, and her family lineage is one for the history books! I know her to be patient, caring, witty, upbeat, cheerful, encouraging, and kind. When she decided to participate, I recall her saying "For nobody but you Treyce'," which meant so much to me. This lady is someone who is part of my life and whom I absolutely love. During one of our Wise Woman Webinars, I recall her explaining that she had nightmares about her experiences, for many years after completion of her doctorate. She would dream that there was uncompleted coursework and that she needed to return after graduation to complete unfinished business. As a former College President, she has utilized her gifts to the fullest. She praises her late Mother as being the indelible ink of her conscience to set a course, by example that aligns

with the historical, educational illumination that her family has left as a legacy. As I think about their overall contributions I can hear their motto "Nothing beats a fail but a try" that has guided their journey.

Dr. Willie 623 resides in a robust, industrial-based, tight-knit community. As an economic center with a focus on manufacturing and healthcare, the area maintains a stable job market. The city's social fabric is woven with friendly neighborhoods and a range of outdoor recreational activities, contributing to its family-friendly appeal. While the cultural scene may not be as bustling as larger cities, the city offers a laid-back charm and a sense of community that resonates with its residents. Dr. Willie 623 is still a mover and a shaker in her community. A beautiful, full-figured brown-skinned Black woman with a bright smile that draws you in, a unique perspective on life, and the best sense of humor. A friend of my older sister, she and I share a memorable laugh from years past when I was in their hometown to help my sister celebrate her birthday. That memory is one we go back to regularly. She would refer to herself as a "woman of a certain age" in her attempts to nudge me to provide additional reminders for her so she could keep deadlines throughout the process. I have known her for years and we have many friends in common. Dr. Willie 623 is one to tell it like it is. She is opinionated, which works well for her immersive community involvement. She has been encouraging to me and likewise to many and did not hesitate to sign on when asked.

Dr. Sally Smith is a resident of a city that stands as a global metropolis with a rich history and diverse cultural landscape. Its economic prowess spans finance, technology, and manufacturing, making it a powerhouse in the Midwest. Its social appeal lies in its diverse neighborhoods, each with its unique character and charm. The city's renowned cultural institutions, iconic architecture, and world-class dining establish it as a cultural mecca. With its

stunning skyline and lively arts scene. The city remains a top choice for those seeking a bustling

urban experience. Dr. Sally Smith was referred by family and she was highly recommended. My

family member thinks the world of her, and they share a friendship and bond that makes them

lifelong friends. Their bond is in like-mindedness and a moral ethic to "do the right thing." Dr.

Smith is a caramel-colored Black woman, tall, slender, and quite attractive. A busy Faculty, and

Department Chair at a prominent community college, she is still utilizing her education

administration background to help others achieve their goals. I have had the good fortune to have

met her before the study through my family member and she is exceptionally kind.

Dr. Fellows makes her home in a state that encompasses a diverse blend of metropolitan

and rural attractions. Her city boasts a rich cultural heritage, with landmarks and a thriving arts

scene. The state as a whole presents a mix of economic opportunities, from agriculture to

technology, appealing to a broad range of residents. The social fabric is woven with Midwestern

hospitality, creating an inviting environment for those looking for a balance between urban

amenities and a more relaxed pace of life. Dr. Fellows was also referred by a family member

with circumstances much like that of Dr. Smith, I know that my family holds her in high regard

and that they share that same ethical bond and work history that makes them life-long friends.

My interactions with her have all been pleasant and memorable. She has been very transparent in

her conversations and very open to this process causing me to feel a deeper connection to her,

though our face-to-face interactions have been seldom. Dr. Fellows is a sophisticated, fair-

skinned, curvaceous, and unassuming, Black woman with a background in Instructional

Leadership and Education. When she is in the room, you want to be close and hear more of what

she has to say. Today she works to counsel on substance abuse. Dr. Fellows shared with me that

the journaling exercise had been therapeutic and allowed her to "let go" of some of the dark feelings she harbored from that period. I feel honored to have helped in some small way.

Dr. Bianca Taylor is from the same area as Dr. Carla which boasts a charming blend of a thriving educational community with a stable economy anchored by Fortune 500 companies. Dr. Rainey lives in the same area as Dr. Willie 623, with a robust industrial base, a tight-knit community, and an economic center with a focus on manufacturing and healthcare. Both are new acquaintances, however, Dr. Taylor's personality bubbled over through the phone. I told her on more than one occasion how much I appreciated the down-to-earth person she was. She also asked questions that created new options for participants in my study. Her inquisitive nature opened doors for participants that created new options for their participation. Dr. Rainey and I met at a function where she was sitting behind me, and our conversation was spontaneous. We were in the presence of greatness, listening to a prominent attorney who sat on a world stage, delivering justice to families and individuals alike. When I spoke to her about my study immediately following the event, she was open to participation. Then, my brother came over to greet us from another table. Gary was already acquainted with Dr. Rainey, he hugged us both and said hello. When she realized we were siblings, she seemed even more agreeable to helping me out. Both ladies have enriched my study through their unique lens on experiences during their post-secondary education. Dr. Taylor's background is in education policy, organization and leadership, while Dr. Rainey's background is in law.

I hold profound admiration for these seven remarkable women. Observing their dedication to their communities, families, and the extensive commitments they uphold, I am deeply grateful that they took the time to recognize my efforts and engage with my journey toward excellence and the fulfillment of a lifelong aspiration..

Table 1 illustrates the dynamics of family composition while pursuing post-secondary educational goals. It is interesting also to note the year in which each participant completed their degree. In reviewing the demographics that help to describe the seven degreed Black women who participated in this project, I noted that the spread of dates in which they received their doctoral degrees spans nearly 60 years, making my study longitudinal in an unanticipated way. Some received their doctorate in the 1960s, while others received their degree in 2023. This period covers significant historical developments that I believe could hold some insight into the experiences reflected in their journal histories. Their locations span across three states, and their occupations vary. A few were married with children while pursuing their doctorate degrees. The dynamic of having a family while balancing the rigor of post-secondary educational expectations is huge. There is also the opposite end of the spectrum: those who were single, lived alone, and had little responsibility outside of their studies. This dynamic is somewhat unusual for Black women who generally find themselves economically situated where the need to work while pursuing a degree in higher education is necessary. Those fortunate to have a spouse with a second income can sometimes tackle the obligations of further study without being employed. However, most economies of the last 60 years, particularly for Black households required a two-income household.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Marital Status	Children	Degree	Year
Rainey	68	Married	2	Law	1987
Willie 623	76	Single	0	Ph.D.	1968
Sally Smith	63	Single	0	Ph.D.	2020
Dr. Fellows	60+	Married	1	Ph.D.	1994
Bianca Taylor	45	Single	0	Ph.D.	2023
Katherine Love	86	Married	0	Ph.D.	1965
Dr. Carla	55	Married	1	Ph.D.	2013

Researcher Positionality

As the researcher in this project, which chronicles the experiences of Black women, and as a Black woman pursuing doctoral status at a predominantly White institution, my positionality as I consider the conventions of my research is that of an "outsider within. Dr. Patricia Hill Collins, noted author, and honorary Professor Emeritus at Maryland College, defines an outsider within as someone who occupies a position of dual marginality within a setting yet outside circles of power. I too have little to no power or control over my circumstances while attempting to fully meet the requirements of a rigorous accelerated online doctoral program where I am enrolled at a predominantly White institution. I am attempting to, navigate family life, as a grandmother and guardian of three of my grandchildren (Major, 11; McKenzie, 9; and Charles, 5) who are at highly active ages where attention, nurturing, and providing direction are of unparalleled importance.

Relationships in this particular program are stifled by time, space, and artificial interaction (online interactions in real-time). As part of the class of 2024, I encounter the same microaggressions that any Black woman might, accused, scolded, made to work harder than my peers for lesser grades, psychologically demeaned through grading tactics that insult my intelligence, impede overall confidence, and lack specificity in guidance which becomes time-consuming when time is of the essence. My White cohorts confer about the assistance they are receiving from their professors and advisors, such as physically making corrections to their papers, providing syllabus information in advance of courses, allowing for additional time for completion of required work, and doing other things to help alleviate stress. There are days I take advantage of teachable moments, or choose my battles wisely, and others that I simply ignore as normal expectations while registered at my distinct, and enduring social location as a racialized, genderized individual. A location not expected to change even once the moniker "Doctor" precedes my name.

Data Collection

Table 2 provides a timeline of events that took place leading to the collection of data associated with the seven educated Black women who participated in this qualitative study. As each journal returned, I prepared a hot cup of orange tea with honey, lemon juice, and a Ricola and completed an initial read-through as if handed a new best-seller. I made notes and underlined unanticipated responses, highlighted outlier information, and identified patterns and trends. Using in-vivo, concept, and evaluation coding, jottings, and notes, I was able to perform a preliminary review of the data

Table 2

Milestones in Research

Milestone	Date/Timeframe
CUSHR Approval	August 24, 2023
Recruiting Start	First week of September
Journaling Start (First 5)	Second Week of October
Final 2 Participants Recruited	Late September
Consent Forms Submission	First week of October
Mailing Second Packet (Final 2)	First Week in October
First Wise Woman Webinar	Mid-October
Confirm Final Participants' Materials	Mid-October
Wise Woman Webinar Scheduling	Mid-October
8 Sessions for Each Participant	Total, conducted over online meetings
Same Guide Used for All Meetings	Consistent for all eight meetings
Receipt of All Journals	By September 11, 2023
Meeting Times	Generally, around 7 p.m., adjusted for different time zones when needed

received. I transcribed the two journals that required it. I decided that it might be wise to use the

sixteen journaling questions posed to participants as a way to organize voices and responses to

begin to process and organize the experiences of each participant. This first step provided a way

of visually identifying similarities as well as diverse experiences for each participant and in each

response. Next, I created a coding system to help classify subjects, patterns, trends, and outlier

information. This process, while time-consuming, brought me closer to the answers to the core

questions in the study (Table 3).

Table 3

Data Analysis and Coding

Data Analysis Steps	Coding Labels
Preliminary Data Sorting	R, C, G
In-Depth Data Examination	IRC, IRG, ICG
Thematic Coding	Themes emerging from R, C, G, IRC, IRG, ICG
Pattern Recognition	Identifying patterns across coded themes
Intersectional Analysis	Examining the interplay between Race, Class, and Gender (IRC, IRG, ICG)

Coding Categories: R=Race, C=Class, G=Gender, IRC=Intersection (Race and Class),
IRG=Intersection (Race and Gender), ICG=Intersection (Class and Gender)

Explanation and Justification for the Use of Questionnaires

Each participant in my study, upon showing interest in participation, received an initial

packet of information that provided an in-depth explanation of the action research study. The

initial packet also included a cover letter explaining the basis for the study (Appendix A), the

informed consent form clarifying the central questions to be addressed in the study (Appendix

B), and the qualifications for participation. The third form enclosed was a questionnaire or intake

form (Appendix C), that provided space to collect necessary demographics for each participant,

contact information, and their area of expertise. This information was crucial to describing the

participants and understanding the historical context from which their experiences were derived.

There is an extremely rich, diverse backdrop to each participant's created knowledge and

inferences. The questionnaires provide some details not shared, but that provide context to many

of the responses to questions posed. Qualitative design centers on comprehending social

phenomena through the lived experiences and viewpoints of the participants themselves. The

questionnaire used in this action research study provides demographic information on the seven

participants to provide essential core data on the socioeconomic range, educational background,

and general context of differing communities and the meaning they bring to each situation.

Justification and Explanation for the Use of Journaling

Sarjeant-Jenkins, R. (2020) describes journaling by the researcher as a tool to assist in the

reflective process, a means for delving deeper into the research process while acknowledging its

nuances. It is a valuable tool for facilitating reflection and a catalyst for constructing knowledge.

It is everything that I wanted the participants in this action research study to experience.

Journaling in this usage gave the participants autonomy, authority, ability, and critical self-

awareness to generate profound interpretations of their experiences—and a holistic

understanding of their journey. Journaling allowed for a comprehensive record of the reflecting,

re-living, re-interpreting, and brainstorming necessary to consider all aspects of their lived

experiences while pursuing their doctorate. Journaling has a sobering component that helps

shape observations and interpretations and allows for refined rationale on decisions, actions, and

assumptions.

The journaling exercise used in this study is notable because (1) this method is original, used earlier with my graduate research project, and (2) it is a unique twist on a data collection tool customarily invoked by the researcher. However, in this action research study, journaling is the responsibility of the participants, giving them autonomy to record when, where, and how they feel most comfortable. Participants were provided instructions and sixteen reflective, open-ended questions to guide their thought process (Table 4). The timeframe of four weeks imposed in this particular study does require some self-discipline in timely completion.

The second package mailed to participants included an actual journal and instructions sheet (Appendix D), as well as a pen with the study inscription (my gift of thanks to each participant), and sixteen questions that would require participants to do a deep dive to recall what they could about their journey toward their doctoral degree. The questions were set up by week, allowing them to focus on a specific series of questions each week for three weeks, then take the fourth week to review what was written and return the journal in the pre-addressed, pre-stamped envelope provided. The instructions directed participants to utilize the fourth week to review what had been written and add any additional notes needed. Then, they were instructed to seal the journal in the envelope provided and drop it in the mailbox with the signed questionnaire. There were to be two Wise Women Webinars scheduled during the journaling process, where I attempted to answer any outstanding questions that the women had as they began the journaling process, and then the second online meeting to clarify any additional questions and emphasize the dates for the return of the journals. One or more questions could be explored during the online sessions. It was my responsibility to try and answer the questions without bias.

These questions were designed to provide insight as they related to the larger core questions in the study: (1) Why are there so few Black women with Doctoral Degrees? (2) What

are the barriers to completing the degree program? (3) What are the salient qualities Black

women see as necessary for graduation? (4) What support systems were most valued while

pursuing this degree program?

Table 4

Journaling Exercise Questions

Week	Journaling Exercise
1	1. Discuss what you recall about your environment during graduate schooling.
	2. Were you physically present in class settings or learning your degree online?
	3. We know the school was predominantly White, but how many doctoral candidates were there? What percentage were Black?
	4. How did your Black professors differ from White professors in terms of expectations?
	5. What support systems were in place to assist you?
2	1. Discuss perceived barriers to your success.
	2. If there was ever a time when your social location (a Black woman of a certain socio-economic status caused you concern in your journey, please elaborate.
	3. How did race, class, and gender impact your success/journey? Share examples, incidents, and stories that illustrate your viewpoint.
	4. What if anything, was missing in terms of your personal expectations of what the post-secondary educational experience should have been like?
	Wise Woman Webinar (second session).
3	1. Discuss the social scene at the college.
	2. Did you feel included in the social fabric of the university?
	3. What role did family and friends play in your educational efforts?
	4. What salient qualities were helpful on your journey?
	5. What qualities or characteristics might future generations need to persevere?
	6. What family values you learned long ago provided the most motivation as you worked to complete your doctorate?
	7. What were your home-life circumstances, and how did they impact your ability to thrive?
4	Week four was used to review and add any other necessary notes

Explanation/Justification for Wise Women Webinars (WWW)

Two weeks after the second packet was deployed to each participant, the initial Wise Women webinar was scheduled, ensuring that all participants had received their journals by October 1, 2023. The instructions enclosed in the packet allowed subjects to begin journaling upon receipt. Before the initial session, I created a guide (Appendix E), that would be used with each webinar that followed. The webinars provided a means for interaction with participants to improve their understanding of the journaling requirements and allowed participants to introduce themselves, and their work history. I too was able to reintroduce myself and the components of the study, facilitate and learn more about each participant, answer any remaining questions, and emphasize the date for the return of the journals. The webinars had an unanticipated impact, in that they became a support for the participants, a safe haven for participants to express themselves, and share their stories without being judged. There was a noted air of camaraderie among participants that was witnessed (although participants are unlikely to become friends) as a byproduct of the experience. Being able to encourage participants in the continued recollection and historical overview of their experiences was a key component of the event. While it became necessary to conduct more webinars than originally planned, none of the subjects of the study participated in more than two webinars. Helping each participant realize the power of sharing their individual stories and the change that could come from the knowledge shared justified the need to incorporate this additional opportunity for data collection and transmission. At the time, I had five of the seven participants recruited. The sessions proved fruitful, and the online platform allowed for some limited interviewing as it related to the study.

Explanation/Justification for the Use of Interviews

The use of interviews can provide a unique window into the complexity of participant's lived experiences, allowing researchers to explore the depth and nuances of their perspectives. They have the power to uncover insights and perspectives that participants might not have consciously articulated or may be unaware of, providing a deeper understanding of thoughts and emotions. In this study, the use of interview questions primarily took place during webinars and in calls for follow-up information or to clarify information provided. Most of the information was garnered through the highly reflective probing, open-ended questions connected to the Journaling exercise. The information gathered in this process deepened my understanding of each participant's perspective and enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the content.

Discussion Triangulation

Using multiple data sets or methods to address research questions strategically enhances the validity and credibility of findings. Additionally, the different data sources or methods corroborate findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research phenomenon. Triangulation can also mitigate bias in results, create a more holistic perspective, and cross-check datasets. Triangulation assures that your research is not limited by the flaws or imperfections of one data collection strategy. Each method (journals, questionnaires, interviews, webinars) measures different aspects of cooperative behaviors, either directly or indirectly. In addition, the use of multiple theoretical perspectives (Black feminist thought, critical race theory, intersectionality, and standpoint theory) to analyze the same data can lead to a more comprehensive interpretation, reducing the likelihood of bias or idiosyncrasies associated with the single data source. While triangulation can be time-consuming in qualitative research, it will allow for the identification of patterns across different data sources and theoretical perspectives.

Understanding variations could lead to deeper insight into the complexity of the research

phenomenon. Each data source or theoretical perspective might capture different facets,

dimensions, or perspectives of the phenomenon under investigation. Triangulation is a powerful

methodological strategy that strengthens the rigor and credibility of research.

Timeline

Before the distribution of the first packets of information concerning the study, Dr.

Taylor, one of the proposed participants asked about the journaling mode. Initially, the

journaling was to be handwritten text in a journal that this researcher would provide. Her inquiry

came as a result of her busy schedule and a need to be able to comply and "keep it moving." I

also had a conversation with Dr. Love who had indicated that she no longer had the dexterity in

her hands, and she wanted to know if she could somehow record her experiences differently. Dr

Taylor asked if she could use voice to text or have someone type her responses. I told her I

would speak to my advising Professor and get back to her. My professor pointed me back to the

IRB committee, who responded quickly by saying the mode of journaling should not impact the

content. Further, they did not require any modifications to the proposed plan of study. I informed

my advising professor and got back to the proposed participant, who did use voice-to-text. Her

question opened the door for other participants to do the same. As a result, only two of the seven

journals needed transcribing. Recruiting began in early September of 2023 when family

members were first canvased for leads to prospective participants meeting the established criteria

for the study. Not only were those leads fruitful, but some produced other potential participants,

and chain sampling naturally occurred. Just when I thought I had all the participants needed, I

was contacted by one prospect who believed that she was too old to have anything relevant to

add to the conversation. She also was unsure about how much she could remember about her

experiences. I decided to send the initial packets to those who were interested at the time hoping

to end up with 7-12 participants. The initial packets were mailed in mid-September of 2023,

which included the cover letter with a full explanation of the study (Appendix A), the Informed

consent form (Appendix B), and the Intake form/questionnaire (Appendix C) enclosed, with the

goal of securing all consent forms in time to begin journaling by October. Once the consent

forms were received, the second packets were mailed, including the actual journal, journaling

instructions (Appendix D), a pre-addressed, pre-stamped return envelope, and a pen (my gift to

each of the seven participants), to begin the journaling exercise. I followed this same procedure

as I recruited additional participants. After a discussion with my advising professor about my

concerns over locating sufficient participants for the study, he advised recruiting more

participants than needed so that in the event all did not follow through, I would still have my

minimum number of participants. Recruiting or finding Black women with doctoral degrees

proved to be an unexpectedly difficult task. Once I had the initial signed consent forms of five

Black women, I scheduled the first Wise Woman Webinar; two of the five women ended up

online. I created a guide to remind myself of the points I wanted to be sure to cover (Appendix

E). I used this same guide with the four additional first sessions I would facilitate with at least

two women each time.

I recruited the final two women, and they each joined one of the later first sessions. The

same thing happened when I began Wise Woman Webinar number two. I never experienced

having more than two ladies online together at the same time. While the number of sessions

increased, the purpose, guidelines, and camaraderie witnessed were always encouraging. I am

convinced they happened like this for a reason. The journals began to come in November, and as

each arrived, I made a hot cup of tea and completed an initial read-thru. All seven journals had

been returned by November 11, 2023. I made some preliminary notes after the initial read-through of each journal. I have begun to sort through the questions and make preliminary notes.

The final session with the participants was to reiterate the week's concentration, review what had been written, and emphasize the need to get the journals returned promptly.

How the Data Analysis Led to Answering Your Study's Research Questions

While I have yet to conduct this portion of my research, I anticipate that the clearly defined research questions will help address the core questions of the study. The data collection tools will help gather relevant data (questionnaires, journaling, Wise Woman Webinars, interviews). As I pre-process the data to address missing values, outliers, and inconsistencies, I hope to improve accuracy and validity. Since the journaling exercise is completed by the participants, it carries with it inherent validity as it is directly from the lived experiences of the source. Exploratory data analysis will add to the ability to understand the basic characteristics of the data. Included in this interpretation will be visual diagrams to identify patterns or trends. The trends and patterns noted may require interpretation, utilizing the three lenses associated with this study (Black feminist thought, critical race theory, and intersectionality). Once this review is completed and conclusions are drawn, a review of possible implications, and acknowledgment of limitations will be conducted and results will be communicated and addressed.

Conclusion

While Black women are enrolling in higher education at unprecedented rates, their experiences navigating the educational landscape from a distinct social perspective remain largely unexamined (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Despite the surge in enrollment, a substantial proportion of Black women are not graduating at a commensurate rate (Donovan & Guillory, 2017). The focal point of this research, titled "Black Women in Higher Education: How Race, Class, and Gender

Coalesce to Impact Success," is to investigate the perplexing disparity between the increasing entry of Black women into higher education and the unreflective graduation rates. In essence, this study seeks to unpack the implications of this paradox and discern the factors contributing to the incongruity between enrollment and graduation outcomes for Black women in higher education.

Chapter 4 will provide a detailed analysis of the data received and all research findings. While they remain unknown at this time, the hope is that interested audiences (Black women, administrators of institutions, professors, researchers, and others in positions to invoke change at the highest level of academic institutional organizations, will glean ways to improve the experiences of Black women, women of color, and those who identify as Black, making their journey to their terminal degree less complicated, daunting, fearful, perplexing, lonely, and burdensome.

CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter presents a comprehensive examination of the data obtained through the study's research design. A more thorough discussion of the findings incorporates an analysis of alternative explanations and compares the results to existing scholarly research found in Chapter 5. Moreover, it delves into the data associated with each of the guiding questions posed during the journaling exercise. It also contextualizes the historical milieu encompassing the social, political, and economic circumstances at the time each participant attained their terminal degree. Additionally, it addresses the four core inquiries underpinning this investigation:

1. the underrepresentation of Black women with doctorates,

2. the barriers impeding degree completion,

3. the essential attributes Black women perceive as requisite for graduation, and

4. the most valued support systems during the pursuit of doctoral studies.

A synthesis of the chapter will tie concluding reflections to the thematic patterns discerned from the gathered data.

Longitudinal Considerations

There is a longitudinal aspect to the study that was unintentional but became relevant as data for the seven participants was pulled together. It was noted that nearly a 60-year span existed between the years of graduation for the seven participants. This becomes a significant consideration in hearing the voices and understanding the historical backdrop that set the tone for the varying perspectives of the Black women in this study. The mindset of Dr. Love receiving her doctorate in 1965, with the Civil rights Act of 1964 having just passed, and the Voting Rights act of 1965, might be very different from Dr. Bianca Taylor who received her doctorate in 2023,

where a Black man had just been president, and a multiracial first Black, first Asian, first

woman, served as Vice President of the United States, and Little Mermaid (a major Disney

character) was Black. Table 5 indicates each participant's graduation year and underscores the

significance of their journeys.

Table 5

Year of Participant Graduation

Participant	Year of Graduation
Dr. Love	1965
Dr. Willie 623	1968
Dr. Rainey	1987
Dr. Fellows	1994
Dr. Carla	2007
Dr. Sally Smith	2020
Dr. Bianca Taylor	2023

The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, shook the Black Community to

its core. It was a time when hope was lost, and Black families everywhere were heartbroken. Dr.

Willie 623 was graduating with her Doctorate amid the turmoil. The shining light in the darkness

was when in the same year, the first Black woman was elected to the United States Congress

(Shirley Chisholm). Dr. Rainey received her doctorate in 1987 when the stock market crashed,

"Black Monday". Black families were already dealing with systemic barriers to accumulating

wealth due to segregation, redlining, racism, and employment discrimination. While the stock

market crash impacted everyone, it exacerbated the existing financial fragility of the Black

family. The job losses and wage cuts that followed created significant economic challenges that

led to housing instability and intensified struggles to maintain a standard of living, and access

healthcare, and educational opportunities.

1994 was when Dr. Fellows was graduating and the Rwandan genocide in South Africa

was taking place. Nelson Mandela had just become the first Black South African President. This

was a symbol of Black liberation that was global in its impact. Mandela's victory sent ripples

around the world reinforcing the idea that through persistence and resistance, it was possible to

overturn entrenched systems of racial oppression. Dr. Carla received her Doctorate in 2007

A year marked by staggering levels of hate in America with hate groups growing more than 48%

from the previous year to having 888 groups in operation. It also marked the bicentennial of the

abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. There were celebrations nationwide that provided the

opportunity to reflect on the historical impact of the slave trade and the lasting effects of slavery

and colonialism on Black families. Calls for reparations, reconciliation in the form of formal

apologies, and restorative justice for the descendants of enslaved Africans were just part of the

impact. It was a time when Blacks worldwide reflected on their shared history of slavery,

honored the resilience of their ancestors, and continued the struggle for racial justice, and

equality. Finally, Dr. Sally Smith earned her doctorate in 2020, the year the Black Lives Matter

movement changed the world. Also, Kamala Harris became the first Black, first Asian, and first

woman, Vice President of the United States.

Table 6 encapsulates a synthesis of the emerging findings and overarching themes

elucidated within the more expansive discussion of findings wherein the voices of the

participants are articulated. These succinct findings hold paramount significance in propelling

the analysis forward, thereby addressing the fundamental inquiries of the study. Moreover, they

offer actionable insights poised to effectuate substantive transformations within academia,

Table 6

Succinct Findings

Findings	*R=Race* *C=Class* *G=Gender*
1. The choice to attend a predominantly white institution is a choice to give up social and emotional well-being.	C
2. Ivy League Universities do not generally set up shops in lower socio-economic neighborhoods requiring long commutes, and at times additional living quarters.	C
3. Issues of access leading to a lack of diversity and feelings of isolation and depression.	RC
4. The lack of identity affirmation, and mentors, leads to code-switching to soften authentic racial make-up to accommodate the environment.	RC
5. At predominantly White Institutions Black women are often isolated, dehumanized, devalued, silenced, pushed out, unwelcome, and unsupported.	RCG
6. One's perspectives and values determine what one observes and the viewpoint from which one creates knowledge.	N/A
7. Economic hardships as socio-structural stressors negatively impact the experiences of Black women.	C
8. Interlocking systems of oppression work to complicate Black Women's experiences.	RCG
9. The researcher suspects that the longitudinal aspect of the study is a main contributor to the responses.	N/A
10. Black women attending predominantly White institutions have very little social outlet and remain focused on their primary goal.	RC
11. The level of pressure to succeed felt by participants, whether it was academic, or engrained family expectations is constant.	RG
12. The lack of academic support stated is an important aspect of these black women's journey.	RC
13. The factors that contribute to the success and graduation of Black women are spirituality, rejecting Eurocentric beauty standards, resiliency, and economic sustainability.	N/A
14. Participants advocate for self-preservation, self-sufficiency, and self-assessment (adjustment and refocus).	N/A
15. Foundational wisdom and Tradition that is the driving force behind educational agency necessary for ultimate success.	N/A
16. Black women make huge sacrifices in pursuit of the terminal degree.	N/A

particularly aimed at bolstering retention and graduation rates among Black women. Figure 2 encapsulates the outcomes derived from the comprehensive analysis of data collected from participants. Black women, shaped by their unique socio-cultural contexts, perceive the world through a lens profoundly influenced by encounters with microinequities, stereotypical constructs, controlling narratives, and discriminatory practices. Their familial and spiritual support systems play a pivotal role in attenuating the impact of societal pressures as they deliberate on further educational endeavors. Upon electing to pursue higher education, enrollment at PWIs presents a myriad of challenges, including compromised well-being, financial constraints, social marginalization, inadequate support structures, and, in certain instances, instances of psychological distress and discrimination. These obstacles significantly influence individuals' decisions regarding persistence or withdrawal, consequently impacting retention and graduation rates. Those who opt to persevere deploy mechanisms of self-preservation, establishing robust support networks that fortify their resolve to succeed. Furthermore, their resilience, faith, perseverance, and reliance on spiritual practices empower them to graduate. However, even upon achieving the prestigious status of a "Colored bigshot," emblematic of their academic accomplishments, the enduring impact of race, gender, and socioeconomic status persists in societal perceptions and receptions.

Discussion

The longitudinal component of our investigation necessitates a meticulous acknowledgment of the temporal context surrounding the attainment of doctoral degrees by participants. This entails a nuanced understanding of historical circumstances, particularly concerning the prevalence of racial tensions and the extent to which the voices and experiences of Black women were integrated into the societal fabric.

Figure 2

Flowchart of Participant Experiences
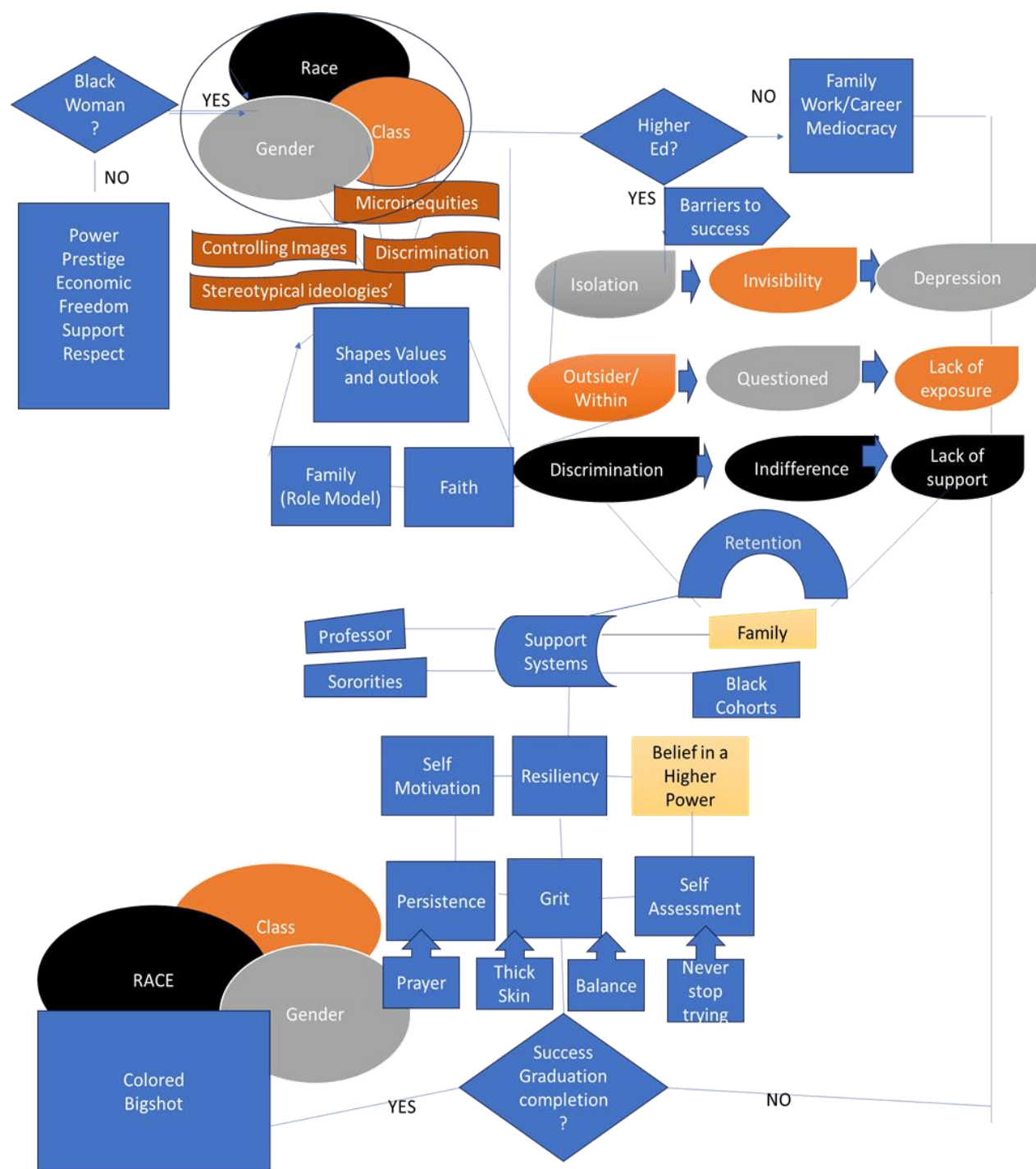
For instance, within the contemporary American milieu, as observed in 2024, the pursuit of doctoral degrees by Black women is profoundly embedded within socio-political dynamics of significant import. Set against a backdrop marked by persistent racial discord, ongoing debates surrounding women's reproductive autonomy, and the erosion of democratic institutions, the decision to embark upon an academic trajectory carries weighty implications.

The prevailing sociopolitical landscape is characterized by a disconcerting proliferation of challenges, spanning from the resurgence of antisemitism and white supremacist ideologies to unabashed acts of violence and hate speech targeting marginalized communities. Moreover, amidst this tumultuous panorama, the specter of a former President's contentious bid for re-election, underscored by allegations of unconstitutional conduct, sexual impropriety, and legal indictments, underscores the precarious state of American democracy.

The paradoxical phenomenon of garnering support from factions of the far left further elucidates the intricate complexities inherent in navigating the contemporary political terrain. Against this multifaceted backdrop, the social, political, and economic challenges serve to impugn the notion of unmitigated prosperity for Black women within an adversarial environment These circumstances shed light on the historical foundations influencing the educational trajectory of Black women in higher academia, spanning the last six decades. Embedded within this narrative are the experiences of seven notable individuals who represent pivotal points, each showcasing a distinct convergence of race, class, and gender within the academic realm. Their narratives epitomize the resilience and strength necessary to overcome systemic obstacles and societal biases. As we embark on this scholarly exploration, it is imperative to acknowledge the manifold challenges faced by Black women scholars, from entrenched institutional inequities to pervasive stereotypes and biases. By interrogating the nexus of race, class, and gender, we seek

not only to understand the complexities of their experiences but also to chart a path toward greater inclusivity and equity within the realm of higher education.

Through the meticulous examination of the trajectories of Black women within academia, this study endeavors to contribute substantively to the broader discourse surrounding issues of diversity, representation, and social justice. By shedding light on the complex intersectional dynamics inherent in these experiences, we aim to cultivate a deeper comprehension of the manifold struggles and triumphs that characterize the pursuit of scholarly excellence within this demographic.

Central to our objectives is the aspiration to serve as agents of enlightenment, seeking to inform and educate those who may be less acquainted with the intricate realities faced by Black women in academic settings. In doing so, we endeavor to serve as catalysts for transformative change within the academic sphere, with a particular emphasis on mitigating attrition rates among individuals of color, and specifically Black women, thereby enriching their collegiate experiences.

Ultimately, the collective endeavor toward a more inclusive and equitable future hinges upon a steadfast commitment to confronting and dismantling the systemic injustices that have historically permeated the landscape of higher education, particularly within PWIs. It is incumbent upon us to lay the groundwork for subsequent generations, thereby fostering an environment conducive to the flourishing of all individuals within academia.

Perceptions regarding Dr. Gay's resignation from the Harvard Presidency have been diverse, with some interpreting it as a triumph in the ongoing struggle to undermine efforts toward diversity, equity, and inclusion within the institutional framework of American academia.

This perspective posits her departure as indicative of broader challenges faced by individuals advocating for such principles within higher education.

Concurrently, a discernible trend is emerging wherein several universities are actively reassessing and, in some cases, dismantling their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies and initiatives, streamlining them to the minimal requirements necessary for accreditation. Moreover, there is a concerted effort underway to scrutinize and potentially curtail activities of DEI at lower administrative levels, to retain only those deemed essential by institutional standards.

In recent years, there has been a notable shift in the educational landscape across the United States, particularly concerning the teaching of African American history and the broader discourse on race. This shift is exemplified by legislative actions in various states that aim to regulate or restrict educational content related to slavery, race, and the legacies of systemic inequality. A prominent example of this trend is the legislation in Florida, notably the "Stop WOKE Act" (House Bill 7), signed into law in 2022 by Governor Ron DeSantis. This law restricts the way race-related topics, including the history of slavery and its enduring impacts, can be taught in public schools, colleges, and workplaces. The legislation posits that such teachings should not cause individuals to feel discomfort, guilt, or anguish on account of their race, thereby significantly limiting discussions on systemic racism and the historical realities of African American experiences. Moreover, this legislative environment has led to the defunding or outright elimination of offices dedicated to diversity, equity, and inclusion within higher education institutions, reflecting a broader ideological movement aimed at reinterpreting or minimizing the focus on racial and social justice issues in educational settings. This legislative context underscores the ongoing contestation over the narrative of American freedom and the

persistent complexities surrounding the nation's race problem 60 years after the Civil Rights Act of 1963.

Black women face the world in their three-dimensional likeness as racialized, genderized, individuals of a certain socioeconomic status. A social location that posits a trifecta of marginality inherent in societal structures. To provide context to the experiences of these individuals, a brief timeline spanning 60 years has been compiled, highlighting key historical events that intersect with their respective journeys. This timeline serves as a reminder of the longitudinal aspect of this study and the socio-political landscape against which these seven women navigated, offering insights into the challenges of their lived experiences and the resilience they demonstrated in their pursuit of academic excellence.

Table 7, titled "Historical Backdrop," delineates the profoundly significant contextual backdrop within which each participant obtained their academic degree. It is imperative to acknowledge that while not every pivotal event is enumerated, the provided framework captures a narrative that encapsulates the prevailing political, social, and economic milieu. One can discern a stark contrast in the mindset between an individual receiving their degree amidst the tumultuous year of 1968, marked by the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and another individual in 2013, witnessing the commencement of Barack Obama's second term in office. Such historical contexts serve as foundational elements shaping the perspectives and experiences of the participants as they navigate their educational journeys

Table 7

Historical Backdrop

Year	Event
1963	Betty Friedan publishes "The Feminine Mystique" sparking second-wave feminism
1964	The Civil Rights Act prohibits workplace discrimination based on race and gender and Freedom Summer
1965	Voting Rights Act of 1965 signed into law
1965	Malcolm Little, aka Malcolm X, assassinated
1966	The National Organization for Women (NOW) founded
1966	Black Panther Party founded by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale
1968	Martin Luther King Jr. assassinated
1971	Congressional Black Caucus founded
1972	Title IX was enacted, prohibiting sex-based discrimination in education
1981	Sandra Day O'Connor becomes the first female Supreme Court Justice
1984	Jesse Jackson runs for President
1989	Colin Powell becomes the first Black Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
1991	Anita Hill testifies against Supreme Court Justice Candidate, Clarence Thomas in a landmark sexual harassment case
1992	Carol Moseley Braun becomes the first Black woman elected to the U.S. Senate
1994	Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) signed into law
1995	Million Man March in Washington, D.C. led by Louis Farrakhan
2001	Colin Powell becomes the first Black U.S. Secretary of State
2008	Barack Obama elected as the first Black President of the United States
2009	Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act signed into law, addressing pay discrimination
2012	Trayvon Martin shooting and the start of the Black Lives Matter movement
2013	Barack Obama begins his second term as President
2016	The National Museum of African American History and Culture opens in Washington, D.C.
2018	#MeToo movement gains momentum, addressing sexual harassment and assault
2020	George Floyd's death sparks global protests against racial injustice
2020	Kamala Harris becomes the first Black and female Vice President of the United States
2021	Juneteenth officially recognized as a federal holiday
2022	Supreme Court overturns Roe V. Wade making abortion unconstitutional
2023	Launch of initiatives addressing racial equity in various sectors
2023	Black Panther Party celebrated for its impact on Black empowerment

Table 7 (continued)

Year	Event
2024	The Emancipation Proclamation's 160th anniversary commemorated
2025	African American History Museum expanded to include more contemporary exhibits
2026	50th anniversary of the Congressional Black Caucus
2028	Expected launch of new initiatives to address systemic racism
2032	The 60th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech
2034	Anticipated advancements in Black representation in politics, business, etc.

The historical context is essential to acknowledge, particularly given the longitudinal impacts evident across the sixty-year span during which participants completed their doctorates. Additionally, the recent political climate following the re-election of the 45th president, now serving as the 47th, cannot be overlooked. This period is marked by heightened concerns over issues of race, authoritarianism, and gender discrimination. The President-elect faces over 40 indictments, including charges related to sexual misconduct, tax evasion, and the misuse of funds. Notably, following his electoral defeat in 2020, he was implicated in inciting the January 6, 2021, Capitol insurrection, an event that resulted in significant damage to federal property, injuries to more than 150 law enforcement officers, and the tragic loss of several lives. This sociopolitical landscape profoundly influences this researcher's journey, framing it within an era marked by divisive and challenging dynamics.

Summary

This chapter has provided a nuanced analysis of the intersectionality of race, class, and gender in shaping the experiences of Black women in higher education. Through empirical research and scholarly discussion, it has elucidated the complex interplay of structural barriers and individual agency in determining academic success. Moving forward, addressing systemic

inequalities, and fostering environments that affirm the diverse identities of Black women are essential steps towards creating more inclusive and equitable higher education institutions.

Throughout history, Black women have navigated a complex web of systemic barriers and societal prejudices, contending with intersecting forms of oppression that inhibit their educational attainment. Their experiences are marked by a unique social location, wherein racialized, gendered individuals of specific socioeconomic status confront a trifecta of marginality within academic spheres. Despite facing myriad challenges, Black women exhibit remarkable resilience and fortitude, drawing upon familial support, spiritual resilience, and communal solidarity to navigate the rigors of higher education. Support systems, ranging from faith and family to mentorship and educational agency, serve as pillars of strength, empowering Black women to overcome obstacles and achieve academic success. Yet, persistent disparities persist, reflecting enduring inequities within educational systems and broader society. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of the intersecting factors influencing Black women's experiences in higher education is essential for fostering inclusive, equitable environments that enable all individuals to thrive academically and beyond.

Furthermore, it is imperative to acknowledge that the longitudinal dimensions of the study indicate incremental advancements, albeit underscored by the persistence of systemic barriers within the upper echelons of academia.

Chapter 5 will culminate the study's final report through the synthesis of findings, delineation of conclusions, exploration of practical implications, and provision of recommendations for future research endeavors.

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

Analysis and Discussion

The purpose of this study has been to amplify the voices of a historically marginalized group, illuminating their lived experiences to provide insights into their historical realities for redress. This research sought to address the central questions:

1. Why are there so few Black women in higher education?

2. What are the barriers to completing the degree program?

3. What are the salient qualities Black women see as necessary for graduation?

4. What support systems were most valued while pursuing this degree program?

The underrepresentation of Black women among doctoral degree holders can be attributed to multifaceted challenges encountered within the collegiate environment. Attendance at predominantly White institutions of higher education often necessitates the sacrifice of various aspects of social, emotional, and overall well-being (Allen, 1988). Issues pertaining to access, including financial constraints and limited resources, present substantial barriers to enrollment and completion of advanced degrees (Hill Collins, 1998). Moreover, factors such as prolonged commutes, insufficient diversity within academic settings, feelings of isolation, and experiences of depression further compound these challenges (Mirza, 2006). The pervasive sense of being devalued and unsupported within academic spaces, coupled with enduring economic hardships, exacerbates the already arduous journey toward obtaining a doctorate (Apugo, 2019). Consequently, the convergence of these intersecting obstacles significantly diminishes the representation of Black women among doctoral degree recipients.

The barriers to completing degree programs for Black women are multifaceted and deeply entrenched within intersecting systems of oppression. Firstly, relinquishing social and

emotional well-being is often a requisite sacrifice, as navigating academia within a unique social context entails contending with heightened levels of stress and marginalization (Zamani, 2003). Furthermore, the absence of adequate mentorship exacerbates these challenges, impeding access to crucial guidance and support networks necessary for academic success (Apugo, 2019). The intersectionality of race, gender, and socioeconomic status further complicates Black women's experiences, as they confront interlocking systems of oppression that perpetuate inequality within educational spaces (Henry et al., 2011).

Moreover, the pressure to succeed extends beyond individual aspirations, encompassing familial and communal expectations. Black women often face elevated expectations from family and friends, driven not only by personal ambitions but also by the desire to pave the way for future generations. This additional burden intensifies the already formidable challenges associated with pursuing and completing degree programs.

Black women encompass a complex interplay of social, emotional, and systemic factors, including the absence of mentorship, the intersectionality of oppression, and the weight of familial and communal expectations. These barriers collectively contribute to a disproportionate underrepresentation of Black women in higher education (Winkle-Wagner, 2009) and underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions to address systemic inequities and promote academic success.

Black women navigating the journey toward graduation identify several salient qualities as imperative for their academic success. Foremost among these is an unwavering focus, characterized by a steadfast commitment to their educational pursuits despite facing formidable challenges. This focus necessitates prioritizing academic responsibilities over other aspects of

life, often resulting in a diminished social life as individuals allocate their time and energy toward achieving their educational goals (Butler, 2021).

Spirituality emerges as another crucial quality for Black women seeking graduation (Knetge, 2018). Drawing strength from their faith and spiritual beliefs, they find solace and resilience in navigating the complexities of the academic journey. This spiritual foundation serves as a source of guidance and support, enabling individuals to persevere in the face of adversity.

Resilience is a hallmark trait among Black women striving for graduation. Faced with systemic barriers and societal pressures, they demonstrate remarkable resilience, bouncing back from setbacks and persisting in their pursuit of academic excellence. This resilience enables them to overcome obstacles and challenges along the path to graduation. Economic sustainability is also recognized as essential for Black women aiming to graduate (Iverson, 2007). Financial stability is paramount, as individuals strive to meet the financial demands of higher education while simultaneously addressing their basic needs and obligations. Achieving economic sustainability is viewed as a vital step towards securing academic success and long-term prosperity.

In the endeavor to attain academic degrees, Black women recognize the paramount importance of diverse support systems that significantly influence their educational trajectory. Among these, faith emerges as a fundamental cornerstone, furnishing a guiding framework infused with spiritual nourishment and unwavering resilience. Anchored in deeply entrenched beliefs, faith assumes a pivotal role by furnishing fortitude, imparting solace, and imbuing strength to navigate the challenges inherent in scholarly pursuits. Additionally, familial bonds,

friendships, cohort networks, and mentorship by professors collectively contribute to the scaffolding of support that is indispensable for the academic advancement of Black women.

The family emerges as another indispensable support network for Black women navigating the challenges of higher education. Drawing upon familial bonds and intergenerational wisdom, individuals find encouragement, understanding, and unwavering support from their kin (Knetge, 2018). The familial sphere serves as a sanctuary, fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment essential for academic success. Similarly, the camaraderie of friends and African American cohorts offers invaluable support throughout the degree program. Shared experiences and mutual encouragement within these communities cultivate a sense of solidarity, camaraderie, and collective empowerment. These bonds serve as pillars of support, fostering resilience and self-efficacy amidst the academic Journey's trials and tribulations.

Answers to the Study's Research Questions

It is essential to highlight how the journaling questions systematically align with the study's four core research questions. These questions serve as critical scaffolds for understanding the lived experiences of Black women within the higher education context. Each journaling prompt was meticulously designed to elicit responses that directly correspond to the broader research questions, thus facilitating a deeper exploration of the nuanced intersections of race, class, and gender.

The theoretical framework—encompassing Black feminist thought, critical race theory, standpoint theory, and intersectionality—collectively provides a rich, multidimensional lens through which the data can be analyzed. Black feminist thought centers on the experiences and voices of Black women as valuable sources of knowledge, emphasizing their agency and

resistance (Hill Collins, 2015). Critical race theory further interrogates the systemic inequities that shape these experiences, underscoring the pervasiveness of race and racism in institutional settings (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Standpoint theory asserts that knowledge is socially situated and that marginalized groups, particularly Black women, have unique insights into their social world (Harding, 2004). Intersectionality, as coined by Crenshaw (1989), emphasizes how multiple forms of oppression—such as racism, sexism, and classism—intersect to shape the realities of Black women.

Collectively, these theoretical lenses infuse depth into the journaling responses, illuminating the coping strategies Black women deploy to navigate the systemic challenges within predominantly white institutions. The analysis of data gathered through journaling elucidates how the findings resonate with broader themes of resilience, self-agency, and resistance. The responses reflect the complex ways in which Black women cope with systemic barriers, affirm their identities, and assert their presence in environments that often marginalize their experiences. These revelations are critical to understanding the broader coping strategies that are characteristic of Black women's survival and success in higher education.

Core Question 1: Why are There so Few Black Women with Doctorate Degrees?

The class attendance modality for most of the participants of this study was in person, where they often felt invisible and out of place. Several respondents described long commutes, with one mentioning a 90-minute round-trip three days a week. One participant shared the experience of being a full-time student living on campus, which allowed her to focus on studies without the need to work. An outlier attended a hybrid program with 60% in-person and 40% virtual classes, even before COVID-19. These accounts highlight the limited flexibility in how educational opportunities have been offered over the years and the challenges posed by the

geographic locations of prestigious institutions, often necessitating significant commutes or relocation.

Cohort demographics were predominantly White in all cases regardless of the cohort sizes, with one respondent noting 50 students, approximately 10% of whom were Black. Another participant described being one of only two Black students in a cohort of 220. Yet another indicated that they were one of four Blacks in their cohort. The lack of diversity was a recurring theme, leading to feelings of isolation, lack of identity affirmation, and, in some cases, depression. One respondent divulged that she had begun her doctorate three different times, at three different schools due to feelings of isolation and depression. An outlier noted a higher number of Black students, but still within a PWI context. These experiences underscore the persistent lack of diversity in many academic environments, contributing to negative experiences for Black doctoral candidates.

Support systems as described by participants ranged from peer networks among African American doctoral students to support from family and friends. One respondent stated, "The African American doctoral students created a village of support, encouragement, and love." Another emphasized the role of a professor who guided her through statistical courses. Another respondent shared that her mother and a sorority sister she called Dr. B. Pendleton formed her support system, while others mentioned the importance of Professors, advisors, family, friends, and peers providing needed support, particularly during the pandemic, which added layers of stress and isolation to the journey. However, another participant felt entirely unsupported, stating, "There was no support. I was on my own to keep track of my progress toward my doctorate and resolve any issues with my faculty, studies, records, and requirements." This

reflects Butler's (2021) research, which discusses how Black women at PWIs often experience isolation and a lack of institutional support.

The impact of Black women's unique social location (as racialized and genderized individuals of a certain socioeconomic status) elicited many different responses. One respondent said that she was often questioned about how she was so intellectual and why would she pursue additional educational endeavors. Another said, "We were examples of the progress we as a people were making over the decades to improve not only our lives but also the lives of those who were to come after us." Another respondent said, "I felt the microaggressions at S#1, professors were outwardly different or rude to Black students." Some respondents noted financial pressures and being first-generation college graduates. One respondent reflected, "I was very conscious of my socioeconomic status." Another participant who also worked at the university where she attended said, "Barriers were staring me in my face every day. If another position at the school became available, I would apply for it just to move from that department. But they had me, and my attempts were halted." Another said, "Race was very present throughout my experience. We had an African American male Dean who was instrumental in recruiting many people of color." These challenges echo Donovan and Gulliory's (2017) findings on how sociostructural stressors negatively impact the experiences of Black women.

Sacrifice: Question: What were your home life circumstances and how did it impact your ability to thrive? Response: Several respondents pointed to family and friends as main supporters, and motivators and others talked about their challenge to balance work, home life, and academia. Others could only recall dealing with an illness that was made better when emersed in course conversations and interactions with peers. There were also a few respondents who said that they were single, with no children, and therefore did not feel the impact of dealing

with family while attending college. The biggest issue was the financial burden and not having that stability while pursuing their degree. It was a constant concern and created a need to follow a strict budget.

Core Question 2: What are the Barriers to Completing the Degree Program?

Graduate **s**chool **e**nvironment questions had participants recalling graduate schooling vivid feelings of isolation and depression due to the overwhelming lack of diversity. One participant expressed, "Very few people looked like me," and described the experience as contributing to a sense of alienation. Another participant mentioned working full-time while dealing with the academic workload, which led to nightmares that persisted for a decade. The absence of management support and the pressure from some professors, particularly those aiming to reduce the number of Black students, further exacerbated these feelings. One outlier, however, credited the presence of peers who looked like her as creating a positive academic environment within a PWI. These experiences echo Allen's (1988) findings on the choices Black women make between attending a PWI or an HBCU and the trade-offs involved, particularly regarding well-being and belonging.

Dr. Howard Rambsy II of Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, spoke at Illinois State University's 3rd Annual Community of Belonging and Success Conference (COBAS) 2024. He discussed courses created for first-year Black men (2004) and women (2009) aimed at enhancing the environment for underrepresented students by fostering a sense of belonging and guiding them through the higher education landscape. His research has shown that these courses have increased retention and graduation rates overall.

In discussing their experiences with professors, the majority of respondents reported having few if any, Black professors during their graduate studies. One participant stated, "I never

had the privilege of being under the tutelage of a Black professor at either of the three universities I attended." Another participant mentioned only one supportive but tough Black professor. An outlier, who had multiple Black professors, observed that all her professors were equally invested in her success. Diversity, equity, and inclusivity are goals that should apply to students, staff, and administration in our institutions. These experiences align with Apugo's (2019) findings that the lack of identity affirmation and mentorship often leads to challenges such as code-switching for Black students.

Perceived barriers to success included the work environment, age, and racial discrimination. One participant noted, "The trauma was from my employer [university]. Vicious treatment, 13 years of sheer hell." Others cited being away from family and struggling with imposter syndrome throughout the PhD process. Was I smart enough? Was I scholarly enough? Would my voice and ideas carry enough weight? An outlier mentioned always being a loner and not feeling significant barriers. Another respondent said, "My biggest barrier was adapting to the Socratic method of teaching, where the professor interrogates the student in front of all the other students and forces the student to demonstrate their ability to analyze the materials and make a decision. I also felt like Louie University did not care about me, and really didn't want me there in the first place." Sarjeant-Jenkins (2020) discusses how one's perspective, influenced by a Black feminist consciousness, shapes the perceived barriers and impacts the overall doctoral experience.

Respondents recounted various experiences with the intersectionality of race, class, and gender. Racial and gender-based discrimination, including microaggressions, lack of support, and barriers to career advancement were common themes. One participant mentioned, "Being Black and female was a 'double whammy.' In graduate school, you were not given the benefit of the

doubt." Another noted that professors were often ruder to Black students. An outlier reported a positive experience due to the presence of an African American dean and many Black professors and students. Another said that race, class, and gender probably did impact their journey, but "I was determined that I was going to succeed. Most of my classes were after work and I commuted three times a week, 45 miles each way." These accounts align with Butler's (2021) observations on how interlocking systems of oppression complicate Black women's experiences, intensifying their unique burdens.

Participants discussed their expectations in terms of what the post-secondary experience should have been like. Participants expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of support and engagement from professors. One respondent stated, "I expected professors to care. Nobody seemed to care that many students never made it." Another mentioned the absence of opportunities to publish with faculty. An outlier, however, reported that all her expectations were met. The researcher suggests that the differences in responses may be attributed to generational gaps, with those who received their doctorates decades ago reporting more trepidation than more recent graduates, indicating progress in some areas.

There was also an expectation of inclusion in the university's social fabric. Most respondents did not feel included in the university's social fabric. One respondent noted, "I felt like an outsider. My life outside of class consisted of taking care of my family." Another mentioned that their study and writing space was confined to their dining room table, reflecting a lack of social engagement. Another participant said, "My educational journey allowed me to continually question my paradigm and to think critically while applying theoretical reasoning fortified with research and development." An outlier, however, felt included due to the university's emphasis on inclusion and being part of a cohort of other adult learners. Another

respondent noted that the preparation of their dissertation happened long before today's technological assists, and the incredible stress associated with this part of the journey. The researcher notes that the pressure to succeed, whether academic or familial, was a constant, with inclusion often sacrificed for diligence and focus on achieving educational goals.

When discussing the role of family and friends one respondent described them as essential sources of support. One participant shared, "Family and friends' support was invaluable. My older sister had a doctorate, so she could relate to what I was going through." Another emphasized the role of the family in helping to maintain stability at home so that she could pursue her degree. Another participant stated, "My family did not live in the area, so my husband kept things going. My friends gave me the space needed to complete lessons and practice various class activities." Several studies suggest the lack of academic support systems uniquely tailored to the needs of Black women, underscoring the importance of cultural competency.

Core Question 3: What are the Salient Qualities These Black Women See as Necessary for Graduation?

Communication skills, organizational skills, and networking. Others relied upon statements they had lived by "Never stop trying," or "Nothing beats a fail but a try." Others said that determination, perseverance, and leaning on faith (the Holy Spirit) were important and that they could not have made it without God. Another stated, "Organizations helped a lot. Being supportive of my Black classmates helped me to be more grounded." One respondent said, "If you do not try to quit at least once a week, you are not doing something right. This journey will strip you down. It will make you feel inadequate. Imposter syndrome is real." Yet another offered, "You will have to be better or just as good to survive."

When discussing the social scene at the college(s) the majority of participants described the social scene as limited or nonexistent. One participant noted, "Not active. Very little interaction." Another mentioned having little time or appetite for socializing due to academic pressures. An outlier reflected on how the historical context of the 70s and 80s influenced their social experience, leading to a more militant mindset as the Black Panther Party peaked and declined. Overall, social outlets were minimal, and participants remained focused on their academic goals.

The top qualities prescribed for future generations in order to persevere were resiliency and self-sufficiency. Participants suggested that a focus on a successful balance of work, life, health, and education would be necessary. Also, believe in yourself and always strive for excellence. Have a determination to overcome challenges, understand program challenges, and be self-sufficient. Also, respondents stated that the support systems most valued while pursuing the degree program were

Core Question 4: What Support Systems were Most Valued While Pursuing this Degree Program?

The salient qualities that contributed to the success of participant's journeys included communication and organizational skills, determination, perseverance, and self-motivation. One participant emphasized, "Lean into your faith. Prayer. Have thick skin." Another recalled their grandmother's advice: "'Go to college, learn, and come back and teach me,' that kept me going." Knetge (2018) discusses the factors contributing to the success and graduation of Black women, including spirituality, rejecting Eurocentric beauty standards, resiliency, and economic sustainability.

The motivating family values cited by participants included, "The spirit of connectedness, support, and resilience are family values instilled as a young teen." One respondent noted family and faith and having a "village" of supporters. Others quoted things they often heard their parents say like, "Nothing beats a fail but a try." Words they would recall when times became rough. Others discussed having a belief in a higher power and how believing in oneself, not listening to naysayers, setting goals, and achieving them was the formula they had been given for success. Others said they had been told at an early age that "the next person is no better than I am, and even when you cannot see the end of the tunnel, keep walking in the direction you are going and eventually your path will become clear." Others say they were taught a sense of responsibility, perseverance, hard work, and the importance of getting an education. Another respondent added that persistence, patience, and the ability to self-advocate, self-assess, and learn what you need to improve, provided a method for success.

Implications for Practice

The findings in this study, which align with established work on the challenges and resilience of Black women in higher education, have several applications that come to mind for academia. There are some impactful ways these findings might help shape the academic experiences of Black women and women of color in higher education. These findings offer important insights that can significantly inform institutional policy and practice, particularly regarding the structural barriers Black women face in predominantly White academic environments. Universities can use these insights to design more inclusive policies that address these challenges, such as implementing targeted support services, mentorship programs, and faculty recruitment strategies that prioritize diversity. These initiatives could create a more

equitable academic environment by dismantling systemic obstacles and fostering an inclusive culture that supports the success of Black women.

In the classroom, faculty can apply these findings to develop culturally responsive curricula that reflect the lived experiences of Black women. By integrating Black feminist thought and intersectionality theory into course content and discussions, educators can create a space where Black women's identities are affirmed and validated. This approach not only supports deeper engagement for Black women but also enriches the learning experience for all students, fostering an academic environment that values diverse perspectives and promotes critical thinking. The study also underscores the importance of representation and advocacy for Black women in leadership roles within academic institutions. To address this, universities can develop leadership training and mentorship programs designed specifically for Black women, providing the tools and resources needed to navigate academic and administrative career pathways. By supporting Black women in these roles, institutions can build more inclusive governance structures that reflect diverse perspectives and enhance decision-making processes.

The research further highlights the resilience strategies and coping mechanisms employed by Black women students in higher education, offering valuable guidance for the development of student support programs. Universities can use these findings to design peer mentorship initiatives, affinity groups, and mental health resources that address the unique racial, gender, and socioeconomic stressors Black women face. These programs would not only provide critical support but also enhance retention and academic success by fostering a sense of belonging and well-being for Black women students. In addition to student support services, the study suggests the importance of investing in research that specifically addresses the challenges faced by Black women in academia. Universities can allocate funding to support scholarship in areas such as

Black feminist thought, critical race theory, and intersectionality, helping to build a more robust

academic foundation for understanding and addressing systemic inequities. This research can

also inform the development of new policies and programs aimed at reducing disparities within

higher education.

Faculty and staff training on implicit bias is another critical area where the study's

findings can make an impact. The research illuminates how racial, gender, and socioeconomic

biases affect Black women in academic environments, and these findings can inform the design

of implicit bias and diversity training for faculty and staff. By raising awareness of how these

biases manifest, such training can help educators and administrators recognize and challenge

their prejudices, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and supportive campus climate for all

students. The findings could also inspire regular equity audits to assess the climate for Black

women and other marginalized groups on campus. These audits could be used by student

governments and advocacy groups to hold the administration accountable for creating a more

equitable educational environment. By identifying areas for improvement, these audits would

help ensure that the needs of underrepresented students are being met and that progress is being

made toward a more inclusive campus culture.

In terms of community building, the research highlights the importance of fostering

allyship across diverse student groups. Creating spaces that encourage cross-cultural solidarity

can help empower Black women by building alliances with others who face similar challenges in

academia. Such initiatives can cultivate a sense of collective strength and mutual support,

contributing to a more inclusive and empowered campus environment for all marginalized

students. The study also calls for curriculum reform that goes beyond traditional Eurocentric

narratives to include more diverse perspectives. By incorporating the work of Black women

scholars, departments can create a more inclusive and comprehensive curriculum that not only enriches academic discourse but also acknowledges the intellectual contributions of Black women. This approach can help to broaden students' understanding of history, culture, and knowledge production, affirming the importance of diverse voices in shaping academic fields. Furthermore, the findings could spur the establishment of research centers or interdisciplinary programs focused on intersectionality. These initiatives would provide a space for scholars and students to explore the complex ways in which race, gender, and other forms of identity intersect with power and marginalization. By advancing intersectional research, academic institutions can foster a deeper understanding of these dynamics across disciplines, benefiting both scholars and students and contributing to broader conversations about equity and justice in society.

Finally, the Wise Women Webinars implemented in this study provided a vital platform for Black women to connect, share experiences, and access resources in a safe and supportive space. Universities could institutionalize such digital platforms to create a sustainable support network for women of color, offering ongoing opportunities for professional development, peer support, and community building. These virtual spaces could be critical for fostering resilience and enhancing the success of women of color in academia, ensuring that they have access to the tools, networks, and resources necessary for navigating academic and professional challenges. This researcher hopes that this study act as a blueprint for institutions to address longstanding inequities and build frameworks that support, celebrate, and empower Black women in academia. These changes allow academia to take concrete steps toward inclusivity, representation, and true educational equity.

Limitations

The limitations of this research were primarily shaped by the restricted timeframe for data collection, which may have constrained the depth and breadth of the information gathered. Additionally, the methods employed for data collection, such as questionnaires and core questions, presented certain inherent limitations, particularly regarding their ability to capture nuanced experiences and complexities related to the subject matter. The sample size, while sufficient for exploratory analysis, may limit the generalizability of the findings across broader populations of Black women in higher education. The design of the core questions and the questionnaires may have also restricted the scope of the inquiry, potentially overlooking other significant variables or unanticipated outcomes that could offer deeper insights into the subject.

Further research could benefit from a more extensive examination of the intersections between education, economic freedom, and long-term outcomes for Black women. For instance, while this study touched on the economic impacts of time spent in education, a more detailed exploration of how these women's pay and career trajectories are affected post-graduation could offer a fuller picture of the challenges they face (hooks, 1994). Additionally, the issue of pay inequity, which continues to affect Black women disproportionately, may not have been adequately captured within the framework of the study, particularly in relation to long-term earning potential and the cumulative financial effects over a lifetime (Patton et al., 2017). Lastly, external factors such as the broader socio-political climate, institutional biases, and systemic inequities in the labor market were not fully accounted for, yet they could significantly shape the outcomes for Black women post-education (Crenshaw, 1991). These factors may introduce unforeseen challenges that could impede their economic advancement, and thus, future research would benefit from considering these variables more holistically.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study of Black women in higher education adds to the overall works that seek out the profound experiences of black women and acknowledge a voice often overlooked among marginalized groups. However, the possibility for a more holistic, systemic study that integrates multiple aspects of identity and experiences, or canvases a larger participant pool, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of how Black women succeed in higher education might look like the following recommendations for future study:

Intersectionality of Race, Class, and Gender in Academia

Future studies should delve deeper into the compounded effects of race, class, and gender on Black women in higher education. Intersectional approaches could provide more nuanced insights into the unique challenges they face, offering data-driven strategies for institutions to address these complexities.

Barriers to Leadership Roles for Black Women in Higher Education

While Black women are often overrepresented in lower-level academic positions, they are underrepresented in leadership roles. Research can explore the institutional practices and systemic biases that hinder the upward mobility of Black women in academic leadership.

Impact of Social Class on Access and Retention

Further studies should investigate the influence of socioeconomic status on the academic journeys of Black women. Understanding how financial barriers affect both access to education and retention rates may reveal key intervention points for universities to create more equitable pathways to success.

Mental Health Challenges Related to Intersectional Identities

The intersection of race, gender, and class often leads to unique mental health challenges for Black women in academia. Future studies can explore how these factors contribute to mental health disparities and the efficacy of current support systems in addressing these needs.

Role of Mentorship and Sponsorship in Career Advancement

Research could focus on the critical role mentorship plays in the success of Black women in higher education. Studies may investigate how mentorship programs specifically designed for Black women can address systemic barriers and facilitate career growth.

Experiences of Black Women in Predominantly White Institutions

Future research can expand on the disparities in experiences between Black women in PWIs versus HBCUs. Understanding these differences can inform policy changes that make PWIs more inclusive and supportive environments for Black women.

Racial Microaggressions and Their Impact on Academic Success

Studies can focus on the long-term impact of racial microaggressions on the academic success and psychological well-being of Black women. Research in this area would help institutions better understand and address the often overlooked, subtle forms of racism that Black women encounter.

Work-Life Balance for Black Women in Academia

Research should examine how Black women navigate the intersection of professional academic careers with familial and community obligations. This study could uncover unique pressures that other groups may not experience to the same degree, informing policies that support work-life balance.

Policy Changes to Support Equity in Academia

Future studies could evaluate the effectiveness of diversity, equity, and inclusion policies in higher education, particularly concerning Black women. This could include an exploration of what policy changes are needed to foster more equitable recruitment, retention, and promotion of Black women faculty and students.

The Role of Institutional Racism in Limiting Opportunities

Research could explore how institutional racism manifests in the policies and practices of higher education institutions, limiting the opportunities available to Black women. This would help institutions identify structural barriers and implement more inclusive practices.

Impact of Cultural Capital on Academic Success

Investigating how Black women leverage their cultural capital in navigating higher education could provide insights into resilience strategies. This would also highlight the importance of cultural competence and inclusion in educational environments that often overlook Black women's unique strengths.

Comparison of Black Women's Experiences to Other Women of Color in Academia

Expanding the research to compare Black women's experiences to those of other women of color in academia can offer a broader understanding of how race and gender intersect differently across ethnicities. This could uncover common and unique barriers, helping to tailor institutional interventions accordingly.

<div align="center">

Conclusion

</div>

In my research, I explore the intersection of race, gender, and class in shaping the experiences of Black women in higher education. This inquiry reveals a profound truth that Black women navigate a unique confluence of oppressions—both racialized and genderized—

which results in dual marginalization. Patricia Hill-Collins, in Black feminist thought, calls this the "matrix of domination," where the intersecting oppressions Black women face are not additive but rather multiplicative, shaping their lived experiences in profound ways. At PWIs, Black women must contend with both race and gender expectations that undermine their intellectual worth. Hill Collins suggests that the very systems of power embedded in academia serve to devalue Black women's contributions, reducing them to what Kimberlé Crenshaw describes as "invisible subjects." Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality illuminates how race and gender coalesce to create a compounded experience of marginalization that is often misunderstood or overlooked in educational settings. My findings show that these structural barriers not only affect enrollment but deeply impact retention and graduation rates. Furthermore, scholars such as Bell Hooks and scholars like Donovan emphasize that the pervasive challenge for Black women is more than just navigating the space—they must constantly code-switch, altering their language and behavior to fit within a dominant culture that devalues their identity. This cognitive and emotional labor is exhausting and requires what Audre Lorde described as "radical self-care" for survival.

My study, influenced by critical race theory (CRT), reveals that higher education is not a neutral space of learning but a battleground of power and privilege. The notion of meritocracy in education is a fallacy, as it ignores how systemic racism and sexism affect access and success for Black women. By employing standpoint theory, we shift the focus to Black women's lived experiences, allowing their voices and narratives to challenge and reframe dominant discourses within the academy. What emerges is not just a picture of struggle but of resilience. Black women in higher education employ a variety of coping mechanisms—spirituality, community building, mentorship. As Deborah Gilliory notes, these strategies are not just survival tactics but

acts of resistance against oppressive systems. Thus, as we reconsider the role of Black women in higher education, we must ask ourselves: how can institutions move beyond performative diversity measures to create truly equitable spaces? This requires not only the dismantling of structural barriers but also the centering of Black women's voices as transformative agents within the academic landscape. The future of higher education must embrace this complexity if we are to foster genuine inclusion and justice.

The educational experiences of Black women in PWIs are shaped by the intersecting dynamics of race, class, and gender. These identities coalesce to produce unique barriers to access, retention, and academic success while influencing the coping mechanisms that Black women employ to navigate higher education.

To synthesize findings and offer new perspectives for assessing Black women's experiences, the following theories combine multiple insights, theoretical lenses, and methodologies to develop profound, thought-provoking lenses for examining the experiences of Black women in higher education.

Cultural Intersectional Resilience Theory (CIRT)

This theory merges Black feminist thought (Hill Collins, 2000) and critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017); and Kimberly Crenshaw's intersectionality (1991) with resilience studies emphasizing how Black women develop and use cultural capital not only as a form of survival but as a transformative tool for resistance and success. The theory highlights the resilience built from navigating multiple oppressions-race, class, and gender and how this intersectionality uniquely positions Black women to develop adaptive strategies that lead to both academic and personal success.

Counterpaces of Critical Reflection Theory (CCRT)

This theory integrates critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Standpoint theory (Harding, 1993), and social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), to examine how Black women in higher education create and use counter spaces as sites for critical reflection and knowledge creation. These spaces which include student organizations, cultural centers, and mentorship networks such as Wise Woman Webinars, serve as both emotional sanctuaries and intellectual arenas where Black women can challenge dominant narratives, reflect on their experiences, and redefine success on their own terms.

Intersectional Knowledge Construction Theory (IKCT): Core Concept

This theory combines Black feminist thought (Hill-Collins, 2000); social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978); and transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991), to propose that Black women's experiences in higher education lead to the construction of new, intersectional knowledge that transcends traditional academic boundaries. Black women do not merely navigate institutional barriers; they actively transform their educational environments by producing knowledge that challenges the intersectional oppression of race, class, and gender.

These three theories—cultural intersectional resiliency theory (CIRT), counterspaces of critical reflection theory (CCRT), and intersectional knowledge construction theory—advance the dialogue on Black women's experiences in higher education by offering new frameworks for understanding how race, class and gender intersect to influence success. Each theory integrates multiple lenses, methodologies, and core questions, providing a reflective assessment of existing literature while pushing the conversation forward.

This study amplified the voices of a historically marginalized group, illuminating their lived experiences to provide insights into their historical realities for the purpose of redress. This research contemplated the central questions:

1. Why are there so few Black women in higher education?

2. What are the barriers to completing the degree program?

3. What are the salient qualities Black women see as necessary for graduation?

4. What support systems were most valued while pursuing this degree program?

This study highlights the profound and intertwined influence of race, class, and gender on the educational experiences and success of Black women in higher education. Through an intersectional lens, it becomes evident that Black women face unique barriers that stem from their positioning at the convergence of multiple marginalized identities. Structural and systemic inequities within academic institutions, such as racial microaggressions, controlling images, and socioeconomic barriers, often place Black women in a continuous struggle for recognition, validation, and success. Despite these challenges, they demonstrate resilience through personal attributes like self-efficacy, persistence, and faith, supported by crucial networks such as family, mentors, Black cohorts, and sororities. However, the cumulative effect of these social, economic, and institutional hurdles can inhibit both their academic and professional trajectories, making it imperative to examine these factors holistically.

This research underscores the importance of institutional accountability in dismantling the deeply embedded structural barriers that impede Black women's success. Policies aimed at diversity and inclusion are crucial, but they must move beyond surface-level solutions and address the root causes of racial and gender inequity. Furthermore, the study reveals the need for continuous exploration into how socioeconomic disparities specifically affect Black women's

post-graduation outcomes, particularly regarding pay inequities and career advancement. Moving forward, it is essential to not only celebrate the successes of Black women in higher education but also remain cognizant of the ways in which institutional and societal structures must evolve to ensure that their success is not achieved despite the system, but with its full support and recognition.

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APPENDIX A

Recruitment Letter

Assignment Week 5   **Treycé Spears**

COVER LETTER

Dear Potential Research Participant:

Thank you for your interest in my research project through Bradley University entitled **Black Women's Success in Higher Education: How Race, Class, and Gender Coalesce to Impact Success.** The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological, transformational study is to find out why so few Black women have doctoral degrees, and what those same women would say are the reasons, the barriers to, the salient qualities needed, and the support systems that are necessary and have made the difference.

Should you decide to share the experiences of your journey to complete your degree program, you will be assisting yet another Black woman to receive a doctoral degree. It is believed that only 1% of Black women have a doctoral degree. Black women share a social location often marred by dual marginality that make our experiences unique. Your knowledge and expertise on the topic might help current and future doctoral students, administrators, professors, and visionaries who care about the transformational capabilities of shared experiences to advocate for changes withing the annals of predominantly White collegiate institutions.

The time commitment for this study is brief. A four-week intense mixture of journaling exercises, questionnaires, Wise Woman Webinars, in-person, or recorded Zoom interviews, to vet the data that is unique to your experience. All data collected will remain on file a minimum of 7-years. After that I would simply ask that you remain open for contact as needed to make sure that your data is interpreted correctly and with the utmost respect.

Participation is voluntary. Further, should you decide at any time during this process, to opt out, you may, and without repercussion.

Your consideration is appreciated,

Treycé Gaston-Spears, Researcher
309-8462493
tgastonspears@mail.bradley.edu

Dr. Jeffrey P. Bakken, Supervising Professor
jbakken@fsmail.bradley.edu

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent Form

Black Women's Success in Higher Education: How race, Class, and

Gender Coalesce to Impact Success

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to elicit experiences from degreed Black women on how they were able to earn their doctoral degree at predominantly White institutions and answer the central questions of the study: (1) Why are there so few Black women with doctoral degrees? (2) What are the barriers Black women encounter in pursuit of an advanced degree? (3) What are the salient qualities that Black women employ to find success in the completion of a doctoral degree? (4) What support systems were most valued while pursuing this degree program? This study requires that you do a "deep dive" in order to recall as much about your journey as possible. Much of what you find will be recorded in questionnaires, recorded interviews and Webinars, and a journaling exercise. Your participation in this study will take approximately one month for the collection of detailed information. I would also ask that you be open to possible contact for clarification of any information received, as needed. All information received will remain confidential as you will be asked to select a pseudonym for yourself and the university you attended. Data will be kept in my possession and made available upon request only to my supervising professor, or any legal entity should such information be required. Any and all information on flash drives or otherwise will be secured in my home office. All Journals and signed documents will become the property of the researcher. Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time and without repercussions.

Questions about this study may be directed to me at 309-846-2493 or my email, tgastonspears@mail.bradley.edu. Also, feel free to contact the research advisor in charge of this study: Dr. Jeffery Bakken at (309) 677- 3997 or at jbakken@fsmail.bradley.edu. If you have general questions about being a research participant, you may contact the Committee on the Use of Human Subjects office at (309) 677-3877.

You are voluntarily deciding to participate in this study. Your submission of the Informed consent and Questionnaire means that you have read and understand the information presented and have decided to participate. Your participation also means that all of your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. If you think of any additional questions, you should contact the researcher(s).

_____   _____

Signature of Participant   Date

APPENDIX C

Intake Information and Questionnaire

Please complete this form and return it with your Informed Consent, in the pre-addressed, pre-stamped envelope enclosed.

Full Name: _____ **Age**_____ **Date of Birth** _____

Mailing Address _____ **City**_____

State _____ **Zip Code** _____

Occupation (former occupation if retired) _____

Employer _____ **Years employed**_____

Occupation _____ **Years** _____

Post-Secondary School: _____**Graduation Date** _____

Discipline _____

Post-Secondary School_____ **Graduation Date** _____

Discipline _____

Marital status_____

Do you have children? Y/ N_____ **If so, how many?** _____

What Affiliations/Organizations do you belong to or support?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Thank you for this demographic information that will allow me to describe my subjects. using your selected pseudonym.
Chosen Pseudonym: _____

Pseudonym for College or University _____ **TLGS100**

APPENDIX D

Journaling Instructions

Black Women's Success in Higher Education: How Race, Class,

and Gender, Coalesce to Impact Success

Journaling Exercise

This packet of information is being sent to you because you consented to participate in the above study. You will have three weeks to respond to the questions and another week to return the enclosed journal.

Journaling requires you do a "deep dive," in order to tap into memories of some that you may have tried to forget or suppress. It is important to provide a glimpse of what student life was like when you attended. Please utilize the time and focus only the questions for a given week in order to be thorough.

Once you have completed your journal, please place it in the self-addressed, pre-stamped envelope, and mail it back. The pen enclosed is my gift to you to say thank you for your cooperation. The first Wise Women Webinar will take place this week on Zoom. They are recorded sessions, watch for the invite.

WEEKLY ASSIGNMENTS

Week One of Journaling Exercise

---

1) Discuss what you recall about your environment during your graduate schooling.
2) Were you physically present in class settings, or were you earning your doctorate in an online program?
3) We know that the school was predominantly White, but how many other doctoral candidates were there? What percentage were Black (approximately)?
4) How did your Black professors differ from White professors in terms of expectations?
5) What support systems were in place to assist you?

Week Two of Journaling Exercise

---

1) Discuss any perceived barriers to your success.
2) If there was ever a time when your social location (a Black woman of a certain socio-economic status) caused you concern in your journey, please elaborate.
3) How did race, class, and gender impact your success/journey? Share examples, incidents, and stories that illustrate your viewpoint.

4) What if anything, was missing in terms of your personal expectations of what the post-secondary educational experience should have been like?

***The second Wise Woman Webinar will take place this week, watch for the invite.

Week Three of Journaling Exercise

1) Discuss the social scene at the college.
2) Did you feel included in the social fabric of the University?
3) What role did family and friends play in your educational efforts?
4) What salient qualities were helpful on your journey?
5) What qualities or characteristics might generations to come need, to persevere?
6) What family values that you learned a long time ago provided the most motivation as you worked to complete your doctorate?
7) What were your homelife circumstances and how did it impact your ability to thrive?

Important Reminder Week 4

Use this week to review what you have written or to write additional information that comes to mind. Be sure to sign this form and return it with your journal. I have included a self-addressed pre-stamped envelope for your convenience.

In signing this document, I understand that journaling assures validity in the details of my responses. I have done everything in my power to be clear, avoid double meanings, and implied possibilities.

Please sign and return the Journal.

_____   _____

Pseudonym   Date

APPENDIX E

Wise Woman Webinars (WWW)

Web Conference Outline for Action Research study**:**

Black Women in Higher Education: How Race, Class, and Gender Coalesce to Impact Success

An informal session with participants to answer questions about the journaling exercise where they have been asked to tell their story of their journey to doctoral status.

Action Research VS Dissertation. I had to receive CUSHR (Governing Board

of Research and Human Subjects) approval to conduct my research rather than defend my research. I will eventually present to Illinois State University, where I will complete an internship, and finally to Bradley University as partial fulfillment of my Doctorate in Education.

Introduction and welcome (5 minutes)

Greet participants and briefly introduce yourself and your research study (qualitative, phenomenological, transformative study of human experience.

Review central questions of the Study:

Why are there so few Black women with doctoral degrees?

What are the barriers to completion of the degree program?

What are the salient qualities Black women see as necessary for graduation?

What support systems were most valued while pursuing this degree program?

Set the tone for an informal discussion.

Note: Please, at any time, feel free to stop me and ask questions or write down your question if you choose to wait so I can try to provide an answer. This is your time to clarify any aspect of the journaling process.

Purpose of the Web Conference & Importance of Journaling (5 minutes)

Explain the main objective of the Web Conference emphasize the goal to answer questions and provide support for the journaling exercise.

It focuses on participants' experiences and the meanings they give to that experience.

It is connected with representation and voice

It observes the personal human qualities of participants and researchers

It allows for the exploration of the research activity itself as a story

It highlights the role of storytelling in understanding their journey to doctoral status

Explain specific instructions and guidelines for Journaling. Clarify the format, timeline, and submission process.

Emphasize the deadline for returning Journals.

Sharing and discussion/ Q & A Session (35-minutes)

Encourage participants to share their thoughts, questions, or initial reactions to the journaling process. Create a safe space for participants to express themselves openly.

Next Steps (2 minutes)

Outline expectations and limited contact after receiving journals for follow-up questions and clarifications.

Ensure that I offer support and provide various means of contact should they need to reach me with additional questions.

Closing Remarks and Adjournment (3-minutes)

Confirm next steps

Set a date for the Final Webinar

Thank participants for their time and attention in providing the requested information,